

# *In for the Long-Haul: what is behind the truck-driver shortage in Aotearoa New Zealand?*

Prepared by Jared Abbott and Mikee Santos, FIRST Union

Survey analysis and report by Marko Galic

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## **Introduction: Identifying the problem**

*“Large corporates don’t seem to care, lower management out of touch” (Michael, truck driver for 44 years)*

*“Pay, workplace culture, long hours, fatalities, no appreciation. Young ones not joining industry because of HIGH COST of getting licence” (Kane, truck driver for 41 years)*

*“Pay, driving monitoring, cameras are really intimidating” (Simon, truck driver for three years)*

In 2003, the research report *Driver Recruitment/Retention in the Heavy Truck Transport Industry* (Oliver Hatton & TERNZ, 2003) revealed an estimated shortage of 1,250 truck drivers in New Zealand. Fifteen years later, the truck industry still faces the same problem. Ken Shirley, from the Road Transport Forum NZ (RTFNZ), asserts that in 2018, “Alarm bells were ringing as drivers in the baby boomers group neared retirement. There were between 22,000 and 25,000 full-time commercial truck drivers in the country and the average age was 54” (as cited in Searle, 2018, para. 2-3). At the same time, Shirley continues, “It’s getting harder and harder to attract young people to become professional truck drivers” (Ibid., para. 4). Despite promotions through magazines and truck shows, an ongoing shortage of truck drivers and the fact that the average age of existing drivers exceeds 50 signals a significant increase to the driver shortage in the near future. Unions and industry leaders observe a lack of interest among young New Zealanders to consider truck driving as a possible career path, accompanied by an ongoing outflow of drivers from the industry. Stricter immigration laws from 2017 – where truck drivers are not on any of the skilled migrant lists except for the Canterbury region (Tarrant, 2017) – prohibit a higher intake of drivers from abroad. In 2017, the Ministry of Social Development provided \$300,000 for training truck drivers in the Gisborne region (Ashton, 2017) and additional resources on a national level through the Sector Workforce Employment Programme in order to attract new drivers (MIT, 2018). Despite this, the shortage of truck drivers remains a significant issue in the transport industry (Baker, 2017).

This report draws from the recent *In for the Long-Haul* survey of 384 truck drivers in Aotearoa New Zealand, conducted by FIRST Union and commissioned by the Transport Workers Network and ProDrive. It tries to identify the main reasons truck drivers are leaving the industry, why many

drivers bear the brunt of additional work, why younger generations are entering the industry in lower numbers than in the past, and what the industry should do to attract more drivers. The survey reveals systemic issues within the sector such as inadequate pay, long hours and driver monitoring and surveillance rather than demographics (age) and worsened driving culture as main factors for the truck driver shortage.

## Background

*“It’s freedom of being on the road instead of a factory under a boss’s nose” (Richie, truck driver for over 25 years)*

Despite the popular culture that has often portrayed truck drivers as villainous and rough, the reality has been drawing a picture of a profession characterised by respect, hard work, freedom and comradeship. The fact that truck driving most often becomes a career path (and sometimes the only job) in someone’s life signifies a special character to the job. It is not uncommon for a truck driver to stay in the occupation for over 40 years. The love of trucks and being on the road instead of stuck behind a desk or in a factory has historically attracted many workers to the industry. However, in recent decades, New Zealand and other similar countries began to face a significant shortage of truck drivers. Both domestic and international research (Min and Lambert, 2002; Costello and Suarez, 2015) emphasises multiple factors for this. Some experts have emphasised causes such as retirement or accidents involving trucks (Watson, 2017), whereas others have asserted wider systemic issues in the industry, including inadequate pay, long hours and limited experience (Baker, 2017). A report on the truck driver shortage in the United States, for example, identified demographics, particularly age and gender, and an increased market demand for drivers in recent years as the main causes for a labour shortage (Costello and Suarez, 2015). Stereotypically considered a male job, many experts both in New Zealand and internationally (Ibid.) have therefore argued that one of the main solutions should be an active inclusion of women in the workforce. David Boyce, CEO of the New Zealand Trucking Association, states that:

Currently only three percent of truck drivers in New Zealand are women, which is significantly lower than the six percent the USA employs, even though the unique geography of New Zealand actually lends itself to making the industry more attractive to women than it is in the USA. The fact that the majority of truck runs in New Zealand take less than a day, having set schedules with predictable home-time gives New Zealand trucking companies the ability to offer women a career in trucking, instead of a living-on-the road lifestyle which is common in the USA (Boyce, 2016, para. 2).

The shortage of truck drivers in New Zealand has been relatively well-covered by news media, particularly in the last couple of years. However, with few exceptions, most articles focused on either descriptive factors in relation to the shortage or served as recruitment advertisements for young New Zealanders to join the industry. For example, an article from January 2018 identified accidents involving trucks as the main reason for drivers leaving the industry: “Truckies are leaving the industry in droves, and reckless car drivers are mostly to blame ... out of fear of killing someone, many truckies are now choosing to leave the industry” (Newshub, 2018). Our survey shows that although accidents do factor into the truck driver shortage, they are not the main reason.

In contrast, this report reveals several structural issues within the industry in relation to the shortage. The *In for the Long-Haul* survey asked truck drivers across the country why drivers are

leaving and new drivers are not attracted to the industry. The issues were investigated through 10 questions, ranging from what the main issues in the industry were to drivers' suggestions for retaining existing drivers and attracting new ones. The survey aimed to identify deeper structural reasons in order to offer both short- and long-term solutions to improve working conditions for drivers, while challenging the shortage of truck drivers in the industry.

### **The In for the Long-Haul Survey**

#### *Survey participants*

Of the 384 truck drivers who participated in the survey, most of them – 95.6 per cent – hold licence four or higher, which allows them to drive heavy rigid trucks with a weight of more than 18,000 kg. Seventy-nine per cent of all participants hold class 5 or higher, which is the most 'wanted' category of truck drivers in the industry, the long-haul drivers of large combination vehicles.

Class 1	2.4%
Class 2	1.6%
Class 3	0.4%
Class 4	16.5%
Class 5	70.3%
Class 6+	8.8%

*Table 1: The percentage of participants holding a particular licence classes*

When it comes to age, just 2.9 per cent of drivers are younger than 25 years old. Those between 25 and 34 make up 12.9 per cent, 35 to 44 year-olds represent 10.8 per cent, 27.4 per cent are between 45 and 54, 30.7 per cent between 55 and 64, and 15.4 per cent of drivers are 65 or over.

<i>Age</i>	<i>Percent</i>		<i>Years of experience</i>	<i>Percent</i>
18-24	2.9%		0-4 years	12.0%
25-34	12.9%		5-9 years	5.6%
35-44	10.8%		10-19 years	24.0%
45-54	27.4%		20-29 years	20.6%
55-64	30.7%		30+ years	37.8%
65+	15.4%		(40+ years = 18.9%)	

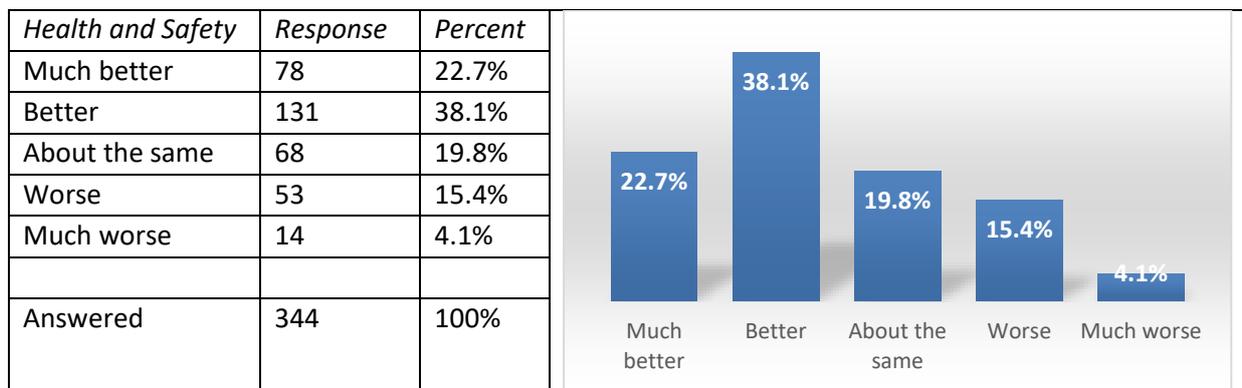
*Table 2: The percentage of participants in relation to age and the number of years in the industry*

With a large proportion of drivers nearing retirement and comparatively fewer entering the profession, it makes sense that the industry is concerned and has been calling on the government to provide assistance – particularly through education/training – and strategies to attract young workers to driving. However, the following answers by existing truck drivers suggest other important issues within the industry, especially in relation to pay, long hours and increased driver monitoring and surveillance.

*Findings: identifying the main issues*

We asked survey participants how they think the industry has changed since they first started a professional career as a truck driver, particularly in relation to health and safety standards and workplace culture. The responses were mixed. Drivers’ views on Occupational Health and Safety standards (OHS) show a consistent trajectory of improvement in this area. Almost 61 per cent of drivers indicated that health and safety has improved since they became professional drivers. Among drivers who have been in the industry for over 30 years, this percentage is even higher, almost 72 per cent whereas, among drivers who have been in the industry less than 10 years, the percentage is only 33.3 per cent. Participants’ comments throughout the survey confirm a significant improvement in OHS in recent decades, often to the degree that some drivers argue that these standards have become too strict: *“some H&S is over the top”*, says John, who has been driving a heavy truck for 36 years, and Wilson asserts *“ridiculous requirements”* in relation to health and safety, particularly the fact that drivers are not allowed to take passengers with them. Many drivers wish that regulations would allow them to take their children as occasional passengers, especially because many of them themselves experienced a working day with their fathers when they were children. For some, seeing their family members behind the steering wheel inspired them to become truck drivers themselves.

Although most participants indicated improved health and safety standards, some asserted they had either stayed about the same (19.8%) or gotten worse (19.5%). This serves as a reminder to the industry that there is always room for improvement when it comes to health and safety.



*Tables 3 & 4: Drivers’ responses to the question ‘How do you think the industry has changed since you first started?’ (Health and Safety):*

Much better & Better	60.8%
Worse & Much worse	19.5%

Satisfaction with workplace culture, which includes relationships among co-workers, drivers and managers, drivers and dispatchers, and so on, is not as high when compared to health and safety improvements. Although almost 38 per cent of drivers indicated that workplace culture had improved, 31.5 per cent thought it had become worse or much worse.

Workplace Culture	Response	Percent
Much better	35	10.3%
Better	94	27.6%
Same	104	30.6%
Worse	88	25.9%
Much worse	19	5.6%
Answered	340	100%

Tables 5 & 6: Drivers' responses to the question 'How do you think the industry has changed since you first started?' (Workplace Culture):

Much better & Better	37.9%
Worse & Much worse	31.5%

Although, workplace culture issues such as favouritism, bullying and occupational violence, and other symptoms of power imbalances between managers and workers are not as common as in other industries. The independent work of truck drivers appears less confrontational than work in offices, retail stores and hospitality, where these issues are very present (Galic, 2018). Despite this, drivers rank the deteriorating workplace culture high on the board when asked why so many are leaving the industry. Furthermore, many participants who answered that the workplace culture had not changed (30.6 per cent) also assert that it has never been particularly good. In response to the question, 'Why do you think drivers are leaving the industry?' they ranked workplace culture higher than retirement and fatalities/risk of injury.

However, there are three structural factors emphasised by drivers even more frequently in relation to the labour shortage: pay, long hours and driver monitoring.

Table 8: Drivers' responses to the question 'Why do you think drivers are leaving the industry? (Can choose more than one)':

Pay	288	80.4%
Long hours	185	51.7%
Driver monitoring (cameras, GPS...)	150	41.9%
Workplace culture	118	33.0%
Retirement	85	23.7%
Fatalities/risk of injury	65	18.2%
Other	83	23.2%
Answered	358	

This table displays one of the most important findings of this survey. Contrary to the popular belief that retirement and fatalities/accidents represent the main causes of drivers leaving the industry,

existing drivers report inadequate pay and long hours as the most common reasons. These are systemic problems rather than circumstantial. Although long hours and the fatigue associated with working them are often a contributing factor in road accidents, the accidents themselves are not the main reason for drivers leaving the industry. More than 18 per cent of drivers indicate fatalities/risk of injury as a common cause of drivers leaving and almost 24 per cent indicate retirement. Almost a third of respondents assert deteriorated workplace culture, particularly relationships with managers and dispatchers, and almost 42 per cent indicate driver monitoring (sometimes up to four cameras recording the driver in the cabin) as more likely reasons for drivers leaving the industry. Simon, a new driver, says, *“Driver monitoring, cameras are really intimidating”*. Paora, a participant with 16 years’ experience, states: *“Pay, long hours, driver monitoring, no to cameras. Where’s our privacy?”* Fete, who has been driving a truck for 39 years, adds: *“Pay, workplace culture, long hours, fatalities, driver monitoring, retirement, no fun, always someone watching, analysing”*, and Tony agrees: *“Workplace culture, driver monitoring, data from all camera recordings, where?? Too much camera facing the driver (4 cams)”*.

More than half of all drivers (51.7 per cent) say that the long hours are a particular issue in the industry. Lengthy shifts, unsocial hours and too many consecutive days of driving result in a compromised work-life balance and overwork/burn-out (Quinlan et al., 2001). Truck drivers are, together with construction workers, midwives and paramedics, among the most overworked workers in the country (Iles, 2017). The long hours are made worse by the inadequate pay, which 80 per cent of participants identified as a problem. Greg, a long-haul driver for 15 years, observes: *“Pay, driver monitoring, our pay rate do not [sic] reflect the responsibilities truck drivers have every day”*, whereas Peter adds: *“Pay, workplace culture (management and workers), driver monitoring, no work-life balance”* (Peter, a truck driver for 41 years).

More than 23 per cent of survey participants identified other issues they believed were influencing drivers to leave, or not enter, the industry. The most common issues were worsening traffic, the high cost of getting a licence and a lack of respect from management. Experienced drivers who teach new drivers often feel that they are not acknowledged for this by management, and many drivers also spoke of poor relationships with dispatchers. Tamati, a metro driver for 20 years, says, *“Pay, workplace culture, long hours, retirement, driver monitoring, NO team work, employers use experienced drivers to teach new ones but no acknowledgement”*. The cumulative impact of all of these issues makes many drivers feel like they are under a lot of pressure.

Our findings are corroborated by an article published in 2017 that identified, *“Little pay, long hours, and limited experience [as] reasons industry experts watch truck driver positions sit around unfilled”* (Baker, 2017, para. 1). Brittany Baker found that some drivers work 50, 60 or even 70 hours per week and that they earn between just 16 to 25 dollars per hour. She also points out the long and costly process of obtaining a class 5 licence, which is in highest demand in the industry. The same issue is emphasised by multiple drivers in the *In for the Long-Haul* survey. Together with a lack of positive representations of truck driving careers for youth, driving is rarely presented as a career at school. Many young people are therefore reluctant to enter the industry.

### *Findings: solutions*

In regards to possible solutions and strategies for recruitment processes for prospective truck drivers, we asked survey participants two questions: what influenced them to become truck drivers and what are three things the industry should do to attract or retain more drivers? In relation to the former question, a thematic analysis revealed four main reasons: 1) the most frequent answer was “my dad” or its related code “family and friends” or “family of truck drivers”. In other words, many current drivers were attracted to the industry by their family members, which included childhood experiences of being passengers in trucks driven by their fathers. This ties in with the second reason – a childhood dream – that was identified among multiple drivers. Truck toys in their childhood and road-trip movies in their youth appeared as early ‘triggers’ to picture a future in truck driving. The third reason drivers entered the industry was a love of trucks and driving: participants emphasised the dynamic nature of the job, being outdoors and seeing the country while working. A love of driving was the second most frequent answer. 4) Finally, a less common but still significant reason was money: some drivers wrote that they decided to enter the industry because of the relatively good pay and adequate hours. With many jobs in the country being significantly underpaid – particularly in hospitality, retail, and manufacturing, where workers most often work for minimum wages and experience underemployment and other forms of precarity – truck driving looked good by comparison. Pay therefore appeared as a crucial element in attracting drivers to the industry and retaining them.

A thematic analysis of the final question – ‘What are three things you think the industry could do to attract/retain more drivers?’ – identified seven popular suggestions: 1) better wages; 2) better hours; 3) better workplace culture; 4) better health and safety standards, including the removal of regulation that prevents drivers having their children on board; 5) better management; 6) less monitoring; and 7) more training.

*Increase pay rates, less hours, more flexibility. In the 70's and 80's, most companies ran their own transport. Now it's all contractors with fierce competition for contracts meaning they're doing work too cheap. Lower pay, longer hours, loss of conditions” (Richie, a truck driver with 25 years of experience)*

Improving wages was the most frequent suggestion by drivers. Many of them feel they are not paid enough for the work they do and that higher pay would attract more drivers to the industry. The second most common suggestion was better hours (fewer long shifts (no shifts over 12 hours); this is inseparable from work-life balance and overwork, issues that need to be addressed by industry leaders. Improving working conditions through better pay and hours is therefore essential to attracting and retaining truck drivers. Drivers say:

*“Better wage, appreciation to drivers by management, the industry should work together, not undercut one another” (Kane, truck driver with 41 years of experience);*

*“Better pay, better working conditions and respect” (Ngairé, ready-mix driver with 42 years of experience);*

*“Better wages, less hours and better recognition for job well done” (Goran, 28 years in the industry).*

Together with better pay and hours, survey participants emphasise that truck drivers should be acknowledged by management and treated with respect. To improve workplace culture, participants

add that it is crucial for the employers and managers to take good care of drivers, to appreciate them and foster a welcoming work environment with good communication and mutual respect.

The fourth suggestion for the industry to attract/retain more drivers relates to health and safety regulations. Some drivers emphasise that health and safety could be better administered and that older trucks should be replaced by newer ones. However, more drivers feel strongly about the regulation that prevents them having passengers: they would like to have them again (as it was in the past), particularly their children. Sam, a long-haul driver with 27 years of experience, says: *“Let children back in the cabs, revisit H&S.”* Being able to take children on board is an important factor in attracting new drivers. Although for obvious safety reasons, we cannot endorse the promotion of children as regular passengers, it may be worth exploring whether an initiative that allows children to engage in the profession in some way should be considered. Some truck companies have a single day of the year where they allow a child passenger. Such an initiative could be rolled out as a ‘national day’ and coupled with a requirement to earn a ‘passenger licence’ that involves children learning about the safety requirements of a passenger and giving them a feeling of earning something while engaging in the industry in a positive way.

Better management and less monitoring are essential to attracting/retaining more drivers. The former ties in with workplace culture, particularly with regards to drivers’ calls for acknowledgement and respect from management. The latter – less monitoring – appears as one of the most frequent and crucial suggestions. Some drivers believe the anxiety and distraction caused by driver-facing cameras has a more detrimental effect on their health and safety than the purpose the cameras purport to exist for. An argument of health and safety in favour of driver-facing cameras is not sufficient, not empirically, much less theoretically. Most drivers feel constantly pressured by this surveillance, which, according to past research in both social sciences and psychology, has a negative impact on workers’ well-being. Liam, a long-haul driver, suggests: *“Reduce pressures on driver, increase pay rate, cameras should be for safety, not for spying, H&S should be done properly.”*

The final suggestion that was made by multiple participants was more training. Existing truck drivers suggest a ‘buddy system’, where experienced drivers work with new drivers, helping them to navigate their new role in order to become competent, reliable drivers. This would require acknowledgment by employers of experienced drivers (mainly financially) who act as buddies. A buddy system could minimise turnover of new drivers and improve workplace culture across the industry. Older and experienced drivers would feel appreciated as mentors and new drivers could make an easier entry into the industry. Participant Frank said, *“Better pay, better working conditions, making it easier to enter the industry. Work on a buddy system, it’s the best training into industry”* (Frank, tanker driver for 14 years).

## Conclusion

The *In for the Long-Haul* survey demonstrated mixed levels of satisfaction in the industry with regards to health and safety standards and workplace culture. Although these are significant issues, drivers identified inadequate pay, long hours and driver monitoring as bigger factors as to why workers are leaving the occupation. With a high average age of existing drivers (54 years) and few young workers choosing the occupation (just 12.9 per cent under the age of 34), the industry continues to face a significant shortage of truck drivers. If systemic issues within the industry are not addressed, retention and recruitment will continue to be difficult and insufficient. Whereas factors such as accidents and retirement are viewed as almost inevitable (the former can be minimised but never completely thwarted), systemic factors such as low pay, long hours and driver monitoring are the result of economic and political decisions. We therefore argue that pay rates can and must be increased, long shifts reduced and driver monitoring minimised. These issues are solvable.

The research report on the truck driver shortage from 2003 (Oliver Hatton & TERNZ, 2003) suggested that entry into the industry should be faster, including potentially “improving the percentage of trainees who successfully complete their training programme” (Ibid., p. 2). Although this signifies an important step in addressing the shortage, the report misses the structural issues of pay and working hours. Our survey indicates that most drivers love their job; many of them have been in the industry for over three decades, but the pay and working conditions do not reflect their hard work and commitment. We conclude that challenging the low pay, long hours, driver monitoring and deteriorated workplace culture represent the main tasks for industry leaders in order to resolve the truck driver shortage in New Zealand.

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