

# Journey to Drive: New Apprenticeship Program Puts More Teamsters Behind the Wheel



April 5, 2019



Anyone who works in trucking or follows the transportation sector knows there is one topic that has dominated the industry in recent years. That topic is the persistent shortage of drivers and how it has plagued carriers nationwide.

According to multiple trucking association, the Less Than Truckload (LTL) turnover rate jumped from 10 percent to 14 percent last year, hitting its highest point since 2013. The shortage is impacting commerce as some companies have reportedly been forced to turn away orders due to a lack of drivers.

While the effects of deregulation are largely to blame for the decline in drivers, as fewer workers are attracted to the harsh demands of the job, the shortage has led to all kinds of proposed solutions including the use of new technology to fill the gap in the labor supply.

But there is another remedy, and it draws from centuries-old practices in the skilled trades: the apprenticeship. Today, Teamsters are paving a new road for countless workers who want to build careers in the transportation industry.

Teamsters have developed a number of apprenticeship programs at locals and Joint Councils, especially in the construction industry, but the new Teamsters Apprenticeship Program is the first national effort by the union that is focused on the transportation industry.

“This program is designed to promote the craft and train people to build strong middle-class careers in the transportation industry,” said Lamont Byrd, Director of the Teamsters Safety and Health Department. “It’s also about getting more members, and young members in particular, to be more engaged in the union as they enter the workforce. The driver shortage is a real problem in the industry and we believe this program offers a unique solution.”

Since it was launched in 2015, more than 240 CDL-A apprentices have been trained in the program. The goal is to train more than a thousand dock worker/drivers in five years.

“This program is really what the Teamsters are all about: bringing workers into the middle class,” said Jim Hoffa, Teamsters General President. “We are fighting to keep the truck driving profession alive in this country and I commend our Safety and Health Department, local unions and other partners who are making this apprenticeship program a success.”

The Safety and Health Department worked closely with ABF as well as the Teamsters Freight Division to put together the curriculum of the apprenticeship program.

“Apprenticeships are important to skilled trades and that’s just as true in the freight industry,” said Ernie Soehl, Director of the Freight Division. “This training program is really a major step for our union, working together with employers to strengthen the industry and create great opportunities for workers in this field.”

## **DOL Certified**

Like many freight companies, ABF has been hit by the driver shortage. So the company turned to the Teamsters for help in bringing new drivers on board.

Combining hands-on experience and classroom theory, the Teamster program was born out of this need for drivers and it is based on a concept that goes back to the Middle Ages. Indeed, the apprentice-journeyman system is not new, but what makes the Teamsters Apprenticeship Program different is that it focuses on two professions not normally associated with apprenticing: CDL drivers and dock workers. In fact, the program is the first in the U.S. that recognizes dock work as an “apprenticeable” professional craft.

An apprentice is trained on the job and gets paid while they learn the profession. But a program built for CDL drivers and dockworkers required certification with the Department of Labor (DOL). In early 2018, the Teamsters Safety and Health Department achieved that certification for CDL drivers. This was followed by the most recent certification achieved by the Teamsters earlier this year, which recognized dock work as an “apprenticeable” craft.

The structure of the program is based on targeting three groups: transitioning military personnel, high school graduates and current dock workers. While service members returning to the civilian workforce are placed on an accelerated track for CDL training, incumbent dock workers are placed on a track to upgrade to CDL. Meanwhile, high school graduates who are too young for their CDL licenses are trained to become dock workers until they are 21 and eligible for CDL training.

Each of these apprenticeship tracks leads to a year of on-the-job supervision following CDL training until the Teamster apprentices are considered full-fledged journey workers in the CDL driver profession.

“The high school graduate component is important,” Byrd explained. “Instead of losing a new generation of potential drivers who go to other jobs since they aren’t old enough for CDLs, the program is geared toward bringing these young folks into the industry at an earlier stage and putting them on a path to becoming drivers.”

In addition to ABF and DOL, Teamsters have partnered with community organizations focused on outreach to disadvantaged communities in order to recruit young workers into the apprenticeship program.

At 18 years old, an apprentice dock worker is registered with the DOL when they enter the program. Their progress is closely monitored by instructors who themselves are trained as part of the program. After 144 hours of dock operation training, they go through 2,690 hours of supervised work experience. Once they are of age, they begin training to upgrade to a CDL. This involves another 240 hours to train for their CDL-A licenses, followed by another 2,690 hours of work experience.

The apprentices are selected by the Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee, which oversees the program and is comprised of representatives from the union and the employer. The Teamsters secured federal grant funding to support the development of the

apprenticeship program, which will be sustained by employer contributions. And the union is also looking to apply for state-level grants to further support the effort.

## **New Blood**

A checklist...that's how some current dock workers at ABF described the extent of their training before the Teamsters Apprenticeship Program was introduced. That checklist is now a 157-page manual, written by the Teamsters Safety and Health Department in consultation with the company.

The curriculum covers dock worker safety, forklift operations, load securement and hazmat training, among other areas. Once completed, the fully trained dock worker who is old enough may begin the CDL program, which includes vehicle inspection training, spatial awareness, hours of service regulations, hazmat transportation regulations, driver medical requirements and more.

The Teamsters' DOL dock worker training manual is the first such handbook ever developed for the dock worker profession. But beyond the detailed curriculum, the program is unique in its methodology of addressing a persistent conundrum in the transportation sector.

"With the problem of an aging driver workforce, we are trying to capture the talent and skills of young workers and inject new blood into the transportation industry," Byrd said.

"You have young people on the one hand who are trained to do the work and, on the other hand, you have companies that are struggling to find drivers. The apprenticeship program is building a bridge between the two," added Chee Chang, a program manager with the Teamsters Safety and Health Department who manages the worker trainings and helped design the program.

Of course, it takes more than rigorous training materials to make the program effective. Just as important are the instructors, all of whom are rank-and-file members who are trained in the program to become high-quality trainers. Candidates for instructor training are identified by local unions and the company.

"It's important to make a good connection with younger folks so they can carry on the work and keep this industry going," said James Mullens, a 24-year ABF dock worker and member of Local 957 in Dayton, Ohio. Mullens joined more than a dozen other ABF dock workers at a training at Local 776 in Harrisburg, Pa. in March to sharpen his skills as instructor to new dock worker apprentices.

“I wish we had this program when I started 24 years ago because this is a really different approach and I think it will help bring more young people into this work,” Mullens said.

But it’s not just about the old teaching the young. Lindsay Mandelik, who has been working on the docks at ABF in Dayton for just five years, also attended the “Train the Trainer” event in Harrisburg.

“This program really got me thinking more about how we talk about the union with new hires and figure out better ways of teaching people who are just starting in the industry. And with the outreach at job fairs and high schools, I think it can help lead to a better recruitment system for dock workers and show that this is actually a good job with good benefits,” Mandelik said.

“These trainings definitely give me more confidence to create a lesson plan to teach the new guys what they need to know to build a future in the industry,” said Gregory Allen, a 26-year ABF dock worker who also took part in the Harrisburg training.

As they discussed load securement principles and participated in classroom exercises using props to visualize the proper loading in cargo, staff from the Safety and Health Department was on hand at the training to facilitate the learning process. A company representative from ABF also attended the event, along with Dr. Ricky Godbolt, the DOL Apprenticeship and Training Representative who worked with the union to secure certification of the program.

“This program is so much more in-depth than any training these guys have had,” said Dave Wolf, the Local 776 business agent who represents many of the members at the Harrisburg training. “I think it’s going to make a huge difference when they bring this information and this approach to training back to the jobsite to teach apprentices.”

By turning back to the practices of earlier generations, Teamsters may help turn back the trend of the driver shortage and jumpstart a new generation of union truck drivers.

