

Shipping costs: Precarity, race and migrant truck drivers in Canadian long-haul freight transportation

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Abstract

In advanced capitalist countries, the seamless circulation of goods depends more than ever on the labour of migrant truck drivers. The trucking industry has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, including deregulation, fragmentation, platformization and periods of freight recession. Through the lens of racial capitalism and critical logistics studies, this paper examines how the Canadian logistics and long-haul transportation sector increasingly relies on racialized migrant truck drivers to sustain itself during economic downturns. By using precarious immigration status as a competitive advantage, carriers have intensified their pressure on migrant drivers. Drawing on an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with migrant truck drivers, company owners and key industry actors, the article reveals how migrant truck drivers experience semi-legal and illegal practices. The analysis section demonstrates that the race-to-the-bottom in labour standards is not incidental but structural. Some carriers bend labour and migration laws and use tactics such as unpaid waiting time, logbook falsification, deportation threats, wage theft and in-cab technological surveillance.

Keywords

Migrant labour, truck drivers, logistics, transportation, immigration

Costes del transporte: precariedad, raza y camioneros migrantes en el transporte de mercancías de larga distancia en Canadá

Resumen

En los países capitalistas avanzados, la circulación fluida de mercancías depende más que nunca de la mano de obra de los camioneros migrantes. El sector del transporte por carretera ha experimentado transformaciones significativas en las últimas décadas, incluyendo la desregulación, la fragmentación, la «plataformización» y periodos de recesión en el transporte de carga. Por medio del lente del capitalismo racial y los estudios críticos de logística, este artículo examina cómo el sector canadiense de logística y transporte de larga distancia depende cada vez más de camioneros migrantes racializados para sostenerse durante las crisis económicas. Al utilizar la situación migratoria precaria como una ventaja competitiva, las empresas de transporte han intensificado la presión sobre los conductores migrantes. Basándose en un cuestionario en línea y en entrevistas semiestructuradas con camioneros migrantes, propietarios de empresas y actores clave del sector, el artículo revela cómo estos conductores experimentan prácticas semilegales e ilegales. La sección de análisis demuestra que la carrera hacia el abismo en las condiciones laborales no es algo fortuito, sino estructural. Algunas empresas eluden las leyes laborales y migratorias, empleando tácticas como la falta de pago por tiempos de espera, la falsificación de registros de conducción, las amenazas de deportación, el impago de salarios y la vigilancia tecnológica dentro de la cabina.

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Palabras clave

Mano de obra migrante, camioneros, logística, transporte, inmigración

Introduction

In 2005, Amazon launched its ‘Prime’ membership program, offering unlimited two-day guaranteed delivery service. Fourteen years later, in 2019, it shrank to one day. In North America, it is common to assume that when shopping online, your order will arrive within a few days, if not within a few hours. For this to be possible, the transportation and logistics sector built a large web of sociospatial relations between buyers, shippers, ports, docks, warehouse workers and truckers. These relations, however, are not seamless. The economic ups and downs following the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation and consumer prices in 2022, and Trump’s tariffs in 2025–2026 caused Canada’s transport industry to experience a prolonged period of freight recession. In general, this means low demand for trucking services, cancelled loads to the U.S. and reduced pay for truck drivers. The transportation industry also serves as a barometer of local, national and global economic trends; when the economy is strong, people buy, and goods move. It is an industry characterized by high levels of commoditization, understood as intense competitive conditions within certain market segments (Coe, 2021). This makes the demand for drivers intrinsically tied to periods of economic growth and decline, creating either moments of labour shortage or high unemployment rates among truckers.

This paper examines how the Canadian trucking industry relies on migrant truck drivers to sustain itself during periods of economic slowdown. The historical deterioration of working conditions led the industry to rely on the recruitment of migrant workers. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with migrant truck drivers, company owners and key industry actors, this article shows how the logistics sector has intensified pressure on long-haul migrant truck drivers. Very little attention has been paid by social sciences to such an important and ever-changing sector of the labour market. In comparison to other sectors, such as agricultural work (Basok et al., 2014; Horgan and Liinamaa, 2017; Thomas, 2016) or care work (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022; Strauss et al., 2017; Vahabi and Wong, 2017), research on migrant workers in the trucking industry is still sparse (McLean, 2016a, 2016b). By shifting focus away from traditional macroeconomic analysis that characterizes scholarly work in the logistics sector, this article highlights how racialized migrants, who mostly drive for small and medium carriers, are used during freight recession periods to cut down on labour costs. The difficult driving conditions, poor pay, bad equipment and discrimination are part of a long race to the bottom in the industry across the North American transport supply chain. This

progressive lowering or deterioration of labour standards is a result of the intense competitive pressure between carriers. Hence, the goal of the paper is to pull back the curtains on often unseen aspects of the transportation of goods by showing how carriers adjust and bend labour and migration laws to find profits. More generally, this contributes to the emergent field of critical logistics studies and racial capitalism by analyzing the transformations in trucking and the consequences for migrant truck drivers.

First, the article begins by reviewing literature on the deregulation of transportation in North America, creating high turnover rates and potential labour shortage periods. Second, I suggest that critical logistics studies and racial capitalism offer a useful starting point for analyzing the role of racialized migrant labourers in trucking. Third, I outline the methodology used for the research and the key aspects of the fieldwork conducted. Fourth, the analysis section presents the findings from the empirical data collected. This section is divided into two parts. The first part analyzes the role of work permits and the precarious lived experiences of migrants in Canada’s truck driving industry. Many newcomers find themselves trapped in difficult employment situations, as they need employer sponsorship to eventually obtain residency. The second part pairs this immigration journey with the depression of wages and deterioration of working conditions that many truck drivers face. One common practice is the manipulation of labour time, which has become a central mechanism of labour-surplus extraction. Drivers are met with unpaid waiting time at docks, are pressured into falsifying logbooks and are increasingly subjected to in-cab surveillance, all of which involve uncompensated labour beyond paid hours. Finally, to critically examine the global transportation of goods, the paper concludes that the case of Canadian trucking offers a vantage point for examining spaces of labour where immigration meets semi-legal and illegal practices, used as a competitive advantage and, often, at the expense of truck drivers.

Trucking industry, deregulation and labour shortage

As previously stated, the logistics and transportation industry is a vast network of various companies and carriers hauling goods at multiple scales. The trucking sector is a major part of this network. It can be broken down into three main categories: (1) *private trucking fleet*, hauling their own goods with their own truck drivers, (2) *for-hire trucking*, which are third parties hired to move goods for someone, ranging

from general freight to specialized freight such as liquids, dry bulks and forest products, and (3) *courier services*, which include companies such as UPS, FedEx and Purolator. All these types of trucking services use brokers, terminals, docks and warehouses to receive and dispatch loads – otherwise known as logistics. The main focus of this article will be on for-hire trucking companies, which can be broken down into two categories: truckload (TL) services, where the cargo is fully loaded for one customer, usually covering long distances, and less-than-truckload (LTL) services, which involve freight that includes multiple orders from different customers being transported to different destinations. For-hire LTL services have been on the rise following deregulation and fragmentation to cut down shipping costs. The following section provides historical context for analyzing contemporary migrant labour in the Canadian trucking industry, particularly the relationship to the U.S. market, deregulation and economic integration in North America, as well as debates around labour shortages.

The Canadian trucking industry is fragmented into tens of thousands of companies battling for freight contracts. Statistics Canada reported there were more than 130,000 carrier companies in 2022, with 80,000 of them reporting no employees, meaning owners operating their own trucks, known as owner-operators (Canada, 2022). This fragmentation of the industry has allowed carriers to use subcontracting to deliver bigger loads faster, at a lower price. For example, a company may be hired to move 50 skids of freight but only have the trucks and drivers for 40. The remaining 10 skids would be subcontracted to another company. This scheme also allows for brokers to enter the market and act as intermediaries between shippers, carriers and trucking service providers, which can blur employment standards and responsibilities. Delivering goods fast and at a low cost stems from the competitiveness of the industry and decades of deregulation. The deregulation of the transportation industry in the 1980s had several consequences. First, the *Motor Carrier Act* of 1980 in the U.S. reshaped the industry landscape with the deunionization of many sectors, including long-haul for-hire trucking services. While consumers and shippers benefited from deregulation, truck drivers saw a drastic drop in pay rates following the elimination of unions and barriers to entry for new companies (Viscelli, 2016). In Canada, the *Motor Vehicle Transportation Act* was enacted in 1987, which also removed obstacles for competition and for trading and shipping goods (Monteiro, 2011). Canadian deregulation largely ‘removed barriers to industry entry, significantly increasing competition among for-hire carriers and often resulting in race-to-the-bottom bidding practices for hauling contracts’ (McLean, 2016a: 47). It also led to the deunionization of the major transport sectors (private, for-hire and courier), mirroring the U.S. situation. This process increased the number of large and medium-sized carriers bidding for loads in an already fragmented industry marked by high levels of competition. As mentioned by Barzyk, the ‘perceived benefits’ of deregulation

programs were increased productivity and lower rates for shippers, when, in reality, it forced Canadian trucking firms to compete amongst themselves for domestic contracts, as well as against U.S. carriers for transborder market shares (Barzyk, 2012).

On the one hand, U.S. deregulation was mostly about national policies within the U.S. aimed at benefiting carrier companies and facilitating the recruitment and training of new truck drivers. On the other hand, Canadian deregulation had more international implications as it marked the arrival of U.S. carrier companies in Canada (Hanson, 2021). The tipping point for drivers came a few years later with the *North American Free Trade Agreement* of 1994, which established the CANAMEX corridor for road transportation between Canada, the U.S. and Mexico. One impact of NAFTA on Canadian for-hire trucking was a shift towards more transborder shipping relative to domestic hauling (Barzyk, 2012). The lifting of trade tariffs, continental integration of the supply chain and transborder competition among companies resulted in higher capacity for storing and shipping goods at very low costs. However, as for many other sectors of the economy, following deregulation, deunionization and global economic integration, pay rates plummeted for truck drivers (Premack, 2020). It resulted in a large transfer of capital from working-class individuals to large retail corporations. Shipping fast at a low cost is ‘the fruit of low wages and bad working conditions for drivers’ (Viscelli, 2016: 7).

This context of depressed wages and worsened working conditions led to a higher turnover rate among truckers (Belzer, 2000). Older white American and Canadian truckers, once called the ‘knights of the highways’ (Levy, 2023), who owned their own trucks and decided their own rates and schedules, started retiring without succession (Chow and Weston, 2008). Viscelli (2016) notes that carrier firms found it more profitable to manage the high turnover problem rather than to fix it. This meant that, instead of ensuring worker retention with higher wages and decent working conditions, companies sought to remove barriers to entry for driver recruitment and formation. Over the last two decades, trucking associations like the American Trucking Alliance (ATA) and the Canadian Trucking Association (CTA) have repeatedly published reports on their workforce shortage issues, noting the elevated number of older truck drivers as one of the key causes (Costello and Karickhoff, 2019). In Canada, many labour market updates cite safety, high upfront training costs, work-life balance and environmental concerns among the causes of driver shortages (Trucking HR Canada, 2022a, 2022b, 2025). Other labour economics research, however, pointed out that the labour shortage narrative within the trucking industry is inconsistent with traditional forms of labour shortages and that, rather, employment dynamics in trucking are cyclical (Gill and Macdonald, 2013; Miller et al., 2025). In other words, high unemployment rates occur when business is bad, and high labour shortage rates occur when business is good. Hence, some have argued that the

forever labour shortage problem within North American trucking is a narrative created by the large companies and trucking associations to lobby for lower barriers to entry, which would ensure constant recruitment of new drivers (Fuller, 2025). While it is unclear if labour shortages in Canada are cyclical, systemic or even simply geographical – as some regions within the same state or province might have shortage issues while others do not – the high turnover rates among drivers are a continuation of decades of deregulation, low wages, piece-rate work and state *laissez-faire*.

In this changing landscape, the arrival of venture capital in freight brokering technologies has levelled the playing field for small and medium carriers to compete for loads against large ones. The historical fragmentation of the North American trucking industry into millions of carriers created a natural demand for technological platforms that could manage the supply and demand of freight movement (Predin, 2025). Online brokering marketplace platforms like Uber Freight, Amazon Logistics, Arnata or Flexport can lower management costs and can show shippers the fastest and cheapest for-hire trucking service available. By having access to the same technologies as large carriers, small and medium companies can use them to offer the same real-time tracking and electronic tendering to shippers without the same hiring standards, driving licence vetting, minimum hours of service, pay-per-mile rates and overall working conditions as large carriers, who are under more scrutiny (Fuller, 2025). As Balay notes, the U.S. trucking workforce became more female, queerer and browner as truck driving became less desirable to the white working class (Balay, 2018). This resulted in a similar progressive transformation of the Canadian workforce towards precarious migrant truck drivers in small and medium for-hire carriers that compete for freight by offering low shipping costs to clients, low pay to drivers, and even sometimes resorting to unlawful labour and immigration practices.

Critical logistics studies and racialized migrant truck drivers

Speeding up the movement of goods has been a long-time goal of capitalism. Recent changes in supply chains can be understood through what Marx called the annihilation of space by time, later reframed by Harvey as ‘space-time compression’. This tackled capital’s intrinsic need to expand its field of operation, cut circulation time and maximize profits (Harvey, 2001b). For Harvey, while inherently uneven, crisis-ridden and globalizing, capitalism finds provisional moments of stability in the form of a spatial fix, or investments in infrastructures and the built environment. Parallel to the idea of ‘technological fixes’, these temporary and ephemeral solutions are a way to overcome barriers to capital’s mobility (Harvey, 2001a).

Within this globalizing context, the field of logistics has long taken pride in being a pragmatic science that optimizes global supply chains, finding value in the seams of a pseudo-

frictionless world. In response, the emerging field of ‘critical logistics studies’ pointed to the role of racial exploitation, colonialism and violence in this sector (Chua et al., 2018). Danyluk suggested a logistical ‘fix’ for capitalism, adding the Marxian framework; the logistics revolution brought a competitive drive to increase the speed of the supply chain, subordinating production to the conditions of circulation (Danyluk, 2018). While it is often studied as the coordination on a global scale, mostly dominated by major transportation actors, many have highlighted the violent and exploitative nature of the industry (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2019; Cowen, 2014; Gregson et al., 2017). The concept of logistics is an inheritance from the military and refers to the management of transportation, supply and material flows for combat. In addition, the role of workers’ resistance movements within the logistics chain itself has been the focus of several studies in many areas of logistics, including transportation, ports, docks, warehouses and trucking (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018; Danyluk, 2023). A key focus of critical logistics studies lies within the power relations and political underpinnings of logistical infrastructures. Yet, we know very little about migrant truck drivers in advanced capitalist countries, how they came to work in long-haul transportation and logistics, and how they experience this type of work (Benedetti et al., 2025).

Truck driving is a difficult job with long hours, even days, spent on the road. It is also an essential job. The role of immigration, work permits, ties to labour shortage narratives and the effects of poor labour standards on truck drivers’ health, wages and working conditions need further research. In for-hire trucking services, carriers bear two major costs: *capital* (trucks, trailers, freight, fuel, brakes and other equipment) and *labour* (truck drivers, dispatchers, brokers, managers, etc.) (Barzyk, 2012; Malkin et al., 2021). To achieve profitability, employers can harness technology to be more productive, or, when geography and policies allow, hire migrant workers to reduce labour costs. As the platformization of brokering discussed above threatens to eliminate traditional freight brokers and third-party logistics, many carriers turn towards truck drivers to reduce labour costs. This low-wage labour migration scheme has been framed as a migration ‘fix’ for neoliberal economies to stave off crises (Scott and Jakobsen, 2025).

Earlier work focused on transnational practices of Mexican long-haul truck drivers in Los Angeles. They move across the U.S.–Mexico ‘borderlands’, exploring the cultural and economic characteristics of long-hauling fresh produce across the border and the ethnic solidarities within these groups (Alvarez and Collier, 1994). Recently, work on first-generation Turkish migrant truck drivers in New Jersey and Pennsylvania pointed to the role of self-employment that trucking offers when other segments of the labour market are not available (Dağdelen, 2024). Many drivers are faced with the decision at some point: to buy a truck themselves and be their own boss. In addition, South American

researchers conceptualized the shift towards self-employment and rampant exploitation in trucking as ‘logistics of unfreedom’ (Portes Virginio and Ferreira, 2023). Their work centres around very similar dynamics observed in Canada: employers forced truckers to work overtime hours with no compensation, sleep deprivation, little to no respect for mandatory rest between shifts and outside work, undisclosed deductions from pay, long unpaid waiting time at the docks and false promises of immigration sponsorship. For Hanson, who also looked into the consequences of deregulation and the ‘rhythm’ of truck driving in Canada, this includes going around hours-of-service regulations and falsifying logbooks (Hanson, 2021). Hanson’s study briefly notes the increasing presence of temporary foreign truck drivers and how employers overinflate yearly income to attract workers from abroad, while also using the continuous ‘labour shortage’ situation to recruit and exploit migrant truckers.

Canada is a settler-state that uses racialized immigration to fill demands in specific areas of its labour market. In this paper, I argue that racial capitalism and critical logistics studies offer a good point of departure to analyze experiences of racism and discrimination within logistics and long-haul transportation. Racial capitalism as an analytical framework insists on the symbiotic relationship between production and racism, and on the racialized dynamics that allow the circulation and accumulation of capital. An important component of racial capitalism is that it typically refers to ‘global relations rather than capitalism within a single national context’ (Go, 2021: 39). Using Canada as an example, and by extension North American logistics, this paper provides a path for other research to investigate other logistical contexts and the important role of migrant truck drivers. Furthermore, racial capitalism broadly refers to the many relationships that are found between inequality and exploitation (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Foundational work by Robinson has argued that racial distinctions shaped the division of labour and emerged as part of capitalism. It is, for him, the main driving force of exploitation. Historical racial ordering, societal hierarchies and consequences of racism are phenomena that, in his analysis, predate capitalism. All capitalism is racial, as it was itself built on European racism (Robinson, 1983). Contrarily, Hall had another approach by insisting on the local and historical specificities of racism(s) caused by capitalism (Hall, 1980). Hall argued that race relations can’t be seen as transhistorical, but rather as part of certain economic epochs of conquests, colonization or developmentalism (Hall, 1980: 308). Racism is used by capitalism to justify exploitation and is a key component of the good functioning of capitalism (Paret and Levenson, 2024: 14).

Robinson’s contribution is foundational to the racial capitalism framework. The present paper takes the latter point of view and argues that racism and discrimination has become a contingent aspect of profit finding in transportation and logistics. As Conroy recently qualifies, Hall’s analysis, where ‘racism and capitalism (or race and class) are not simply two separate spheres or systems, but rather mutually constituted distinctions within a shared unity’, differs from Robinson’s

analysis, where ‘capitalism is understood to require hierarchization, and racialization is understood as integral – indeed, posited as necessary – to that process’ (Conroy, 2024: 42). In his discussion on whether race is a contingency or a necessity, Conroy suggests that racism is simply a logically contingent path-dependent phenomenon. For Go, the argument that race is a necessity is also hard to argue. Rather, he points out that although racism has historically worked for capitalism, in theory, other ‘isms’ could serve the same function – that is, gender, religion, ethnicity (Go, 2021: 44). Racial capitalism has been used recently for different types of labour and sectors, including platform labour (Animento, 2024; Gebrial, 2024; McMillan Cottom, 2020), urban resistance (McClintock, 2018; Santamarina, 2024), labour geography (Nowak, 2024; Pulido, 2017; Strauss, 2020) and migrant work (Abdelbaki, 2024; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2021). The article’s empirical contribution to racial capitalism and critical logistics studies highlights how migrant truck drivers experience racism, discrimination and abuse during periods of economic slowdown. While exploitation of migrant workers is neither new nor novel to the logistics sector, this article documents a specific period of freight recession to examine how it intersects with multiple dimensions of precarity: structural interdependence between migrant workers and their employers due to the permit system, systematic dismissal of safety concerns and resilience strategies that truck drivers develop in response to discrimination. These historical features of racial capitalism, for example, whose health and safety at work is on the line, are intensified because of the intense competition in trucking.

Methodology

Researching racialized migrants’ precarity is a sensitive subject and presents a complex methodological challenge. The methodology for this research is based primarily on three sources of data. The first source of data comes from online observation related to truck driving on various platforms and websites such as Facebook, Quora and Reddit. This source of data was used to map the organization and issues in the industry, as seen by truck drivers online. I downloaded hundreds of discussions between truck drivers online regarding working conditions, pay, and the immigration process, and subsequently analyzed the findings in relation to the next two sources of data. The second source of data comes from an online questionnaire that was posted on four Facebook groups for truck drivers, which specifically asked immigrant truck drivers to participate. This led to 204 immigrant truck drivers responding to an online questionnaire about their working conditions and immigration status. The email addresses were collected, which led to the third and final source of data. The third source of data comes from 50 semi-structured interviews with migrant truck drivers and key actors. These interviews range from 30 to 90 min. I selected 36 im/migrant truck drivers using purposeful

sampling, selecting from a variety of countries and permit types from the list of 204 online participants (temporary foreign worker permit (TFWP), open work permit (OWP), refugees and permanent resident (PR)). The interview guide was divided into three sections: personal information about the participants, working conditions and socio-political organization of the industry. The interviews were all audio-recorded and conducted via Zoom calls. Many of the truck drivers were in their trucks, waiting at docks for their trucks to be loaded, but none were driving. All interviews were conducted in either English or French; those conducted in French I subsequently translated into English. I must also acknowledge my standpoint as an educated white male researcher from Canada and the dynamics of power and privilege that may have influenced the interview process. Furthermore, I conducted the interviews in my language, whereas some migrant truck drivers had to express themselves in their second, third or even fourth language. The names of all truckers were changed upon collection to protect their identity.

This article seeks to recentre the voices and experiences of migrant truck drivers, whose perspectives are often ignored by economist perspectives. It is important to add that the 'immigration status' variable emerged as a dominant element of the sociodemographic profile of the participants. Permits and bureaucracy significantly influence the everyday lives and choices of truck drivers. Of the 36 participants, 6 were on a closed permit – the TFWP. This is a single-employer temporary work permit that needs to be renewed every year. In contrast, 12 participants held an OWP – meaning they could choose where to work. Finally, 10 participants were PRs, obtained mostly via an express entry program for qualified workers, and 4 were Canadian citizens – also obtained via trucking. I also interviewed 4 refugees which also considered permanent in Canadian immigration.

The countries of origin of the interviewed truck drivers include India (n=8), Nigeria (n=6), Ghana (n=3), Morocco, Algeria, Mexico, Syria, Dominican Republic and more. Most of the truckers interviewed reside in the Greater Toronto Area – the hub for truck driving companies in Canada. Lastly, all truckers were aged between 25 and 38, which speaks to the workforce transformation observed in North America: from an older generation of white male citizen truckers to a younger generation of racialized immigrant truckers. For this article, the interviewees are referred to as T1 to T36, along with their gender (M, F), country of origin and immigration status: Canadian citizen, PR, OWP or TFWP. It is important to note that even if a truck driver is a citizen or a PR, many recount their time as a TFWP or OWP holder. When pseudonyms are used, the names have been changed to protect the identity of the truck drivers.

In addition to interviews with truck drivers, I met with 14 key industry stakeholders from a wide range of associations representing employers, human resources professionals, non-profit organizations and other relevant actors.¹ These interviews were also recorded. To conceptualize and relate

qualitative empirical data, interviews were analyzed using NVivo software. I paired the fieldwork data (online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with truck drivers and key actors) with publicly available data from the Canadian government. Most notable were files on the TFWPs issued for each quarter of 2024 and 2025, and a list of all the non-compliance and labour complaints to transportation and logistics companies to see semi-legal and illegal practices in the industry.

Migrant labour in Canadian long-haul transportation

Canada, like many other countries since the early 2000s, progressively moved from permanent immigration towards a temporary labour migration scheme (Dauvergne and Marsden, 2014; Pellerin, 2015). After establishing causes (deregulation, deunionization and fragmentation) and consequences (depressed wages, high turnover rate, difficult working conditions), I move the analysis to include three key aspects that stem from race and precarity in the industry: safety concerns, resilience strategies and mental health. Of the 291,700 truck drivers active in Canada, a quarter reported having a non-official first language (neither French nor English) (Trucking HR, 2022b). This changing of the workforce within trucking and towards precarious immigrants occurred through various programs. The truck driving industry saw a drastic rise in the number of TFWPs, with 8839 migrant truck drivers arriving in 2024. This follows a 361% rise in temporary TFWPs granted to the trucking industry between 2018 and 2023 (Teamsters, 2026). For some employers, temporary foreign workers are a necessary patch to labour shortages, especially in rural regions. For others, the value of migrant labour lies in lower wages and tougher working conditions. This section highlights the central role that work permits, racism and discrimination play in precarity, via two interconnected aspects of migrant labour in long-haul truck driving.

Interdependency and work permits

In Canada, there are two main types of permits: (1) *closed*, under the 'temporary foreign worker program' and for which the employer needs to fill out a recruitment form called the 'Labour Market Impact Assessment' (LMIA) – this form confirms there is a need to hire a worker from abroad; and (2) *open*, mainly under the International Mobility Program (IMP). The government grants an 'open work permit' based on a points system aligned with labour market needs. For years, in part aligned with the systemic labour shortage narratives, truck driving was a profession that allowed workers to immigrate and settle through rapid permanent residence under the 'Express Entry' program. Many truck drivers met during fieldwork had acquired permanent residency through this program. In the U.S., Tricks and Peoples found that the

depression of wages and deterioration of labour standards in trucking are in part due to companies taking advantage of foreign workers to cut down costs (Trick and Peoples, 2021). In Canada, the total TFWP for truck drivers quadrupled between 2010 and 2024 (Teamsters, 2026).

I called a truck driver named Kanan for an interview right before one of his long hauls between Toronto and Vancouver. He was sitting in his truck waiting for his freight to be loaded. This unpaid waiting time is common in trucking. Drivers can sit in their trucks for hours, not knowing when the load will be ready. Kanan is owed \$40,000 from his ex-employer in unpaid wages. He came to Canada on a temporary work permit with the hope of getting permanent residency. His employer did not pay him for a few weeks, then for months. He realized that his employer had closed the company. This is a common scheme. Moreover, when applying for temporary workers, the employer needs to pay for the LMIA form, which costs \$1000. Some carrier companies will charge the workers for the fees:

I was asked to pay for the LMIA; I think it was close to \$1000. (T12, M, Nigeria, TFWP)

I came to Canada in 2021 on TFWP. I had to pay for part of the process; the company helped with some paperwork, but I covered the application fees, medical exam and some document processing costs by myself, and altogether it was around \$500, before coming to Canada. I also had to pay for visa applications and forms after. (T11, M, Ghana, TFWP)

Some other companies seize this opportunity to sell the permit for high amounts. This also happened to Kanan. The company that hired him charged him \$15,000 for the LMIA. This practice of selling temporary work permits is common in trucking. It also puts the driver in debt before even starting to work. Finding migrant truck drivers with closed work permits who wanted to share their stories was a difficult task. Many feared losing their right to stay in Canada. As its name suggests, the TFWP is a closed and temporary work permit that requires annual renewal. This means the permit is tied to one employer, forcing the permit holder to only work for this employer. Workers on TFWP cannot access the same rights as PRs and citizens. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the employer to ensure the temporary worker's well-being.

The TFWP produces interdependence and unbalanced power dynamics between the worker and the employer. Because of the systemic labour shortage narrative, carrier companies have found they can get fast and easy approval from the government to recruit migrant truck drivers from abroad. Many have gotten into the business of selling these temporary work permits to hopeful migrants:

They get 20 LMIAs just to sell on the market for people to come to Canada. Visa counsellors are sitting in every plaza in Canada.

You go to every small plaza, there are visa consulars, and they sell the LMIA from truck companies. (T9, M, India, PR)

The commodification of trucking temporary work permits has seen little to no attention. Commodification is the process of turning something that should have no value into a commodity or treating something as a commodity. It places a price on things that shouldn't have a price, such as an immigration permit, which is held by a monopoly (the government) and is not commercialized. This process has been around for a long time, aptly named by Walia as the 'commodified inclusion' of migrant workers (Walia, 2010, 2021). The work permit system also connects with Portes and Ferreira's logistics of unfreedom: the 'structured political mediations, which have recast state responsibilities of social reproduction to match the logistical needs for capitalist valorisation' (Portes Virginio and Ferreira, 2023: 2). The interdependency between employers and TFW has allowed some carriers to refuse to refund certain unexpected expenses to independent contractor migrant truck drivers. The vulnerability of temporary drivers allows some companies to withhold or steal wages, as happened to Kanan and many others:

They do this kind of stuff to the migrants, work permit guys who don't have permanent status. The guys are vulnerable; they don't have a legal status. If they try fighting a big company, they can get into some trouble and they [are] going to lose their status. (T19, M, India, PR)

Another driver, Manjin, recalls his time as a new driver in the industry as very hard. When you start in the industry, you must do long team runs. The new driver, especially those on temporary status, will have no choice but to accept less money in the hope they will eventually pay for the permit and get permanent residency. He said he came from India, needed money and wanted permanent residency. The company that hired him promised to help with his dream. He was told: 'You can get permanent residence, but you will have to work for us. We won't pay you the full rates'. The pay-per-mile rate average was 60 cents per kilometre; the company gave him 30 cents. This was echoed by another driver, who recently got his permanent residency and for whom the structural organization of the profession easily leads to low pay:

In our jobs, immigrants often get underpaid. They tend to accept an offer from an employer without really negotiating the offer, without really negotiating their pay. You accept whatever the employer offers to make sure you have some food on the table. (T2, M, Nigeria, PR)

During the interviews, migrant truck drivers described situations where they experienced modern forms of indentured, wage theft, fraud, labour code violations, long unpaid wait times and unexpected maintenance costs. In the online

questionnaire, racism and/or discrimination came up as the main issue faced 38 times out of 204, including low pay because of immigration status and being threatened with deportation:

We have so many international drivers; they are not paid on time. If they speak up, companies will fire them, and they will have to find a new employer for immigration. (T9, M, India, PR)

Some said they were forced into excessive driving hours, using two logging devices (as if there were two drivers in the truck) to circumvent hours-of-service regulations. Some even said they were paid using a bird's-eye straight-line distance between departure and destination instead of the actual on-the-road driven distance. These practices are not new, having been used in logistics over time. They are obviously not used across the board by all companies. Recently, they have re-emerged, cutting labour costs and allowing for a competitive advantage that disproportionately affects migrant workers, especially those on temporary work permits. Many of the participants said that 'TFWP drivers are forced by their companies to go the extra mile. They are tired. They are pushed'. (T13, M, India, PR). Both Kanan and Manjin highlighted the difficult situation of working as a truck driver under a temporary work permit.

The OWP, on the other hand, allows the migrant worker to work for anyone or change employers without losing status. However, this does not mean there is no interdependence within the relationship between the OWP holder and the employer. For Prabhas, who arrived in Canada through this program, the interdependence is more subtle. A worker still needs an employer to sponsor the application for permanent residency. While working for an employer, many truck drivers find themselves being misclassified as independent contractors. This happened to Prabhas, who was working for an owner-operator. He was also looking for an employer to support his paperwork. The owner-operator for whom he was working told him he should register as an independent. This meant that he had no authority to support his residency application. Prabhas realized this a couple of months later and left his company. In the work permit systems, closed or open, the other important aspect regarding immigration is the distribution of labour opportunities: prolonged unpaid waiting time at loading-unloading docks, cheaper fares per kilometre and longer time on the road for fewer kilometres driven (i.e. traffic, small roads, bad weather). As many participants have said, newcomers get the worst routes, the tougher routes: 'You start to wonder if background connections play a role in who gets what'. (T10, F, United States, OWP). This is what makes the truck driving case different. Wages and pay rates are negotiated. Unpaid overtime is difficult to calculate, and when loads are rare, you don't have a choice but to accept it:

Most immigrants like us, we face exploitation through unfair contracts and unpaid overtime. (T14, F, Morocco, OWP)

I accept it because they give it to me. I do not really have a choice. (T8, M, Dominican Republic, OWP)

Umar is a trucker from Nigeria. He works for a company with an OWP, so his immigration journey is not tied to his employer. However, he mentions that within his company, many of the long-haul opportunities (the ones that pay the most) go to Canadian-born drivers first. This can be partly due to years of experience within the company. When Canadian drivers don't want the haul, they will go to the migrant drivers but at a lower rate. He says: 'You're going to get harder runs, bad loads, white Canadians are going to get the best jobs or the best gigs in trucking'. These go beyond just the worst routes and lower-paid jobs. Our interviewees also mention many cases of under-the-table subcontracting by Canadian-born drivers to migrant truck drivers. Canadian drivers who get first pick on the higher-paid long-haul jobs will offer to transfer their route to the migrant truck drivers for 60% or 70% of the total pay. Another driver, in the TFWP, told me:

I've faced some discrimination, not always direct, from my fellow employees here; sometimes it shows in how foreign workers are treated compared to local drivers. We might get harder routes, fewer breaks, or less pay for the same amount of work. (T11, M, Ghana, TFWP)

These poor working conditions relate to the increasing role of brokers. A company hiring migrant truck drivers at half the pay can go to a broker and offer transportation services for half the rate. They can take on the same loads for the same amount of time but at half the price:

The small company, which wants to take pay you off, will give you keys right away. Then they will keep giving you excuses when it's your payday, or they won't even pay you. I know so many drivers, even on social media, they go in front of the houses of their bosses. It always depends on who you are and what's your status in Canada. The brokers who take advantage of drivers, the companies that force drivers to work, and keep driving more and more. They don't pay them, and that's wrong. Mostly, new immigrants get in with it. (T22, M, India, Citizen)

The tactics listed above are part of a continuing trend that started in the 1980s with the deregulation of the trucking industry. They are not new. Delinquent carriers often engage in unpaid work, wage theft, paperwork fraud, lowballing pay-per-mile rates, politics of waiting during loading and unloading and subcontracting (Belzer, 2000). Recently, during periods of economic slumps, when freight contracts are scarce, carriers hiring migrant truck drivers can offer transport at low prices by reducing labour costs. Drivers are aware of their importance in ensuring the industry runs: 'People don't really realize how important truck drivers are. Without us, nothing moves. I just wish for more recognition and better

treatment for drivers, especially immigrants'. (T21, M, Africa, OWP). McLean concluded in 2016 that 'the exploitation, inequality, and carnage resulting from the current organization of labour in the trucking industry is primarily responsibility onto South Asian drivers, and is thereby easily dismissed as a racial or cultural problem' (McLean, 2016b: 51). Work permits are one aspect that emerged from the interviews. The other aspect goes beyond the immigration status and concerns racism and discrimination – an important topic for the racialized migrant truck drivers interviewed.

Racism, safety concerns and resilience

Adopting the racial capitalism perspective, this section investigates the consequences of racism and discrimination towards racialized migrant truck drivers. This was, for many, one of the most important points they wanted to know about their job. Three key aspects emerged from dealing with everyday racism and discrimination: safety concerns, resilience and depression. As two Black African truck drivers mention:

I'm African, most of us get abuse and discrimination because of our skin colour. On my arrival in Canada, I faced a lot of this, especially trying to get to work as a truck driver. (T17, M, Senegal, TFWP)

Racism and discrimination happen a lot. I think that's one of the reasons why I take certain jobs, even when I shouldn't. I'm always scared something might go wrong with my immigration process. (T15, M, Nigeria, OWP)

The first aspect concerns safety. Over the last year, there have been multiple articles published in traditional news media about migrants and racialized truck drivers being 'dangerous' on the roads. Many associated accidents with rising levels of immigrant drivers, stating that this had become a matter of public safety.

Jamal, another truck driver from Nigeria, is currently working for a company on an OWP. He explains that migrants' safety concerns regarding breaks or tires are often not taken seriously. It's brushed off as unimportant, and he's accused of complaining again. This is also seen during encounters with police officers along highways: 'You're going to get harder runs, bad loads, white Canadians are going to get the best jobs or the best gigs in trucking. Even when you drive, you meet a police officer on the way. The way the whites are being treated is so different than the way the Black drivers are being treated'. Not being taken seriously when raising safety concerns is critical for public road safety. Safety and security concerns came up 18 times as the main issue faced by truck drivers in the online questionnaire of 204. During the interview, Jamal, like many other racialized truck drivers, said he is often given the worst trucks, the hardest routes, while also being scapegoated for 'bad' driving. For many, when they voice concerns about truck mechanics or

tires being overused, it is not taken with the same care as Canadian drivers:

I feel treated differently because I'm an immigrant. Sometimes I notice that I'm being given the less desirable routes. I'm being given longer hours. Or in terms of safety concerns, it's not taken as seriously as other drivers. (T20, M, United States, OWP)

This goes beyond mechanical concerns. As in the previous section, migrant truck drivers report being pushed to do longer hours on the road. Jamal told me that it is expected of migrant truck drivers to get long hours done. This is shared by many others; their concerns regarding fatigue, bad weather or broken-down trucks are not taken seriously:

I notice that I'm being given the less desirable routes. I'm being given longer hours. Or in terms of concerns, it's not taken as seriously as other drivers. I would say it happens every day, but those experiences make me aware that being an immigrant can put you in a more vulnerable position. (T20, M, United States, OWP)

When dealing with difficult working conditions, low pay, bad truck mechanics and difficult routes, many migrant and racialized immigrants turn to resilience. The effort given to the job is an essential aspect of truck driving, as reported: 'I work so that my efforts speak for me. People do call me for jobs because of my efforts'. (T21, M, Africa, OWP).

Racial bias and discrimination intersect with resilience strategies – small acts that help individuals and groups cope with everyday realities, but do not change existing social relations. One trucker says: 'It's one of the things that makes me feel less human. People tend to disrespect me because of my skin colour. Especially the management people in the company that I work for'. (T4, M, Nigeria, OWP). Resilience strategies do not challenge the existing social relations and structures within which they occur. In trucking, especially, enduring long, difficult hours on the road is common, which often leads to a thick skin and a sense of pride in one's work. This pride does not mean that migrant and racialized immigrant workers are not aware of the conditions of labour under racial capitalism:

There have been moments when I felt overlooked, or let's say when I felt not respected enough because of my accent, because of my background. Being a temporary foreign worker in Canada has taught me a lot. It taught me about hard work and adapting to a new system. I also think there's still a lot that needs to change to make things fair. Immigrant workers like me, we contribute a lot to the country's economy, especially in industries like trucking. So, sometimes we don't feel like we're fully protected or valued. (T11, M, Ghana, TFWP)

These cases are not representative of the whole industry. It is very hard to evaluate the scale of unlawful practices as temporary foreign workers are unlikely to speak out. A limitation of

this analysis is confirmation bias. Truckers who participated in the study wanted to speak out about their difficult working conditions and experiences with racism and discrimination. However, that does not mean it is not worth unveiling and documenting.

While immigrants have been scapegoated for housing shortages, accidents and decreases in wages for White working-class Canadian truckers, their labour remains essential to the functioning of the transportation industry. Early deregulation eliminated labour protections and boosted competition, but it also came with racialized precarity and violence. Migrant truck drivers on the road 6 or 7 days per week, sleep-deprived and pushed by their employers to meet unrealistic delivery time are common. Who takes risks at work is a historical feature of racial capitalism. Throughout this fieldwork, most racialized migrants said they were told to drive more, for lower rates, in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions. They experience unpaid overtime, get their wage stolen or need to pay for unexpected maintenance costs. Those under the TFWP also face deportation, and so many remain silent.

Conclusion

When Amazon announced one-day delivery service for all Prime members, it sent shockwaves through the logistics industry. Speeding the circulation of goods at the lowest price became the number one priority for all companies involved. This article joins the refusal by critical logistics studies of the commonly accepted idea that supply chains operate in a smooth and frictionless way (Chua et al., 2018; Cowen, 2014). In the context of NAFTA-based economic liberalization and state neoliberal deregulation, cross-border crossings by trucks grew exponentially. The globalizing, uneven economic geography of capitalism has produced a need for constantly shrinking delivery windows and cutting down costs (Harvey, 2001a, 2001b). In response, the *in situ* spatial fix of importing a more productive, docile and lower-cost workforce of truckers from the Global South came with sustained racial and discriminatory practices (Scott and Jakobsen, 2025). In Canada, this is enabled by precarious work permits and used to gain a competitive advantage (Vosko, 2022).

While barriers to the circulation of capital, goods and materials are taken down, barriers for migrants moving across countries, accessing rights and decent work are put up. This article first traced the historical deregulation and fragmentation of the truck driving industry since the 1980s. With depressed wages, worsened working conditions, high turnover rates and labour shortages, migrant truck drivers became an essential part of keeping goods moving. In this paper, through the lens of racial capitalism and critical logistics studies, the analysis highlights the experiences of migrant truckers. These difficult working conditions for racialized newcomers are a historical feature of racial capitalism. Now, this is part of a competitive strategy used during an economic slowdown, rather than a solution to labour shortages.

First, the analysis explores the interdependency between migrant workers and employers, and by extension the structure of the work permit system in trucking. This interdependency has been in place for a long time and is not unique to the trucking sector. However, due to certain key aspects of truck driving (pay-per-mile wages, long hours on the road and job-related costs), this relationship is deepened, and key features of racial capitalism are intensified. The analysis also exposes how immigration policies, particularly the shift from permanent residency pathways to temporary work permits, function as mechanisms of labour control. The interdependency created by closed (and open) work permits represents more than an administrative procedure in which state immigration controls align with carriers' needs, it becomes the business model. Second, because of this relationship, many truck drivers report cases of abuse, racism, discrimination, wage theft and manipulation of labour time. Finally, and considering the two previous points, many cite safety concerns and their need for resilience. Migrant truck drivers are now essential to the movement of goods in North America. This paper adds an empirical case study of their experience in trucking, showing how racial capitalism materializes in Canada's long-haul transportation industry. Future research should examine resistance strategies among migrant truckers, the role of labour organizing in challenging these conditions and a comparative analysis of logistics in other sectors and contexts.

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Ethical consideration

All participants gave their informed consent before the study. The study was conducted in accordance with Concordia University's Ethics policies, and the protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee (Certification: 30021764). All collected data was anonymized and stored on secure, password-protected servers to ensure full confidentiality.

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Note

1. Key actors interviewed include Canada Truck Operators Association, Manitoba Trucking Association, British Columbia Trucking Association, Canada Trucking HR, Action Utility,

Champlain College, Truck News, Teamsters Union, Labour Community Center of Peel, Western Professional Trucking Association, West Coast Trucking Alliance, Truck Stop Québec and Priority Worldwide.

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