



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
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...from the
director's chair

B.C. truck inspectors throw drivers under the bus

Misguided public perception of trucking is a concern that's always with us, but when you're struggling to pay for fuel or driving around in circles looking for a place to park, it's not always top of mind. Then wham! You learn through the media that trucks are responsible not only for polluting the air we breathe, but for all the death and destruction on our highways as well.

More often than not, negative stereotypes are held by people who aren't close to the industry. But when commercial vehicle inspectors are complicit in promoting the "killer truck" image, it's pretty hard to take.

The union that represents commercial vehicle inspectors in B.C. has launched a campaign to raise public awareness in an attempt to force the province into hiring more inspectors, but the anti-truck messaging they're using to achieve their goal is nothing short of despicable. In radio spots and roadside billboard messages – and bus ads too – the B.C. Government and Service Employees Union (BCGEU) claims that a 26% cut in truck inspector staffing levels is leading to more carnage on provincial highways, and they are pointing the blame directly at truck drivers.

The billboard shows a photo of a big truck looming in the sideview mirror of a car, under the caption: 'That truck may not be road safe.' The radio blitz features an aggressive truck air horn blaring in the background with a voice-over intoning the same message. Any way it's presented, the message is clear: you, and the wreck of a truck you drive, are a threat to public safety. And they, the understaffed and overworked truck inspectors, are the wannabe saviours of road safety.

The messages direct viewers and listeners to the union's Web site, www.roadsafebc.ca, where they have posted road safety "facts" illustrating how highway safety has deteriorated since 2003 when staffing levels began to decline. The site urges readers, along with their friends and families, to send a message telling the government to hire more safety inspectors.

One of the "astonishing" facts the union

presents is that truck traffic has increased by close to 50%, and heavy vehicle crashes have increased by over 12%, since 2003. The number they don't present, though, is the number of crashes per kilometre travelled, which is the only meaningful way of measuring crash frequency against some constant. Frankly, if truck traffic had increased by 50%, but crashes had increased by only 12%, I'd say we're ahead of the curve.

In any case, B.C. crash statistics show that injuries and fatal collisions involving trucks actually decreased by 30% since 2003. And while the total number of inspectors hasn't changed much, the Ministry has shifted more of them into its mobile force, almost doubling the number since 2003 and giving them one-third more vehicles. The number of truck inspections has actually increased by 15% during the period in question.

Don't get me wrong, every crash that can be prevented is a tragedy averted, but these union leaders are trying to tar and feather you while suggesting to the public that they can change all that. They can't and they won't.

BCGEU singles out CVSA's Roadcheck inspection statistics as an example of "selective reporting" by the B.C. government to mislead the public into thinking the province's roads are safe. In Roadcheck 2011, 22.6% of commercial vehicles inspected were taken off B.C. roads for safety violations, but the BCGEU claims the actual road safety picture is much worse. They point out fly-by-night operators stay off the road during the annual 72-hour Roadcheck campaign, skewing the numbers, and that a more accurate overview of road safety can be found in the monthly statistics gathered by their inspectors. These numbers show that from January to October 2011 there was a – wait for it – 22.5% out-of-service rate.

But the irony is, of course, that the 2011 Roadcheck number of 22.6% out-of-service



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hasn't fluctuated more than a point or two for the past decade. With that number pretty consistent year over year, are truck inspectors making as much difference as they'd like the public to believe?

They also pooh-pooh Roadcheck's usefulness as a measure of road safety, claiming that if "ticketed violations" were counted in blitzes, the "fail rate" would be 70%. We know – although the public wouldn't – that ticketed violations don't count toward out-of-service conditions, but if the situation were severe enough, the truck would be taken off the road anyway.

The way the BCGEU plays with numbers is ironic and laughable, except it's not very funny to the general motoring public who could care less about out-of-service rates and ticketed violations, but buy into the union's message: more trucks and fewer inspectors has endangered their lives. The campaign is nothing short of fear-mongering, playing on the public's unease sharing the road with big, dirty trucks, and it drives me wild.

I think the union management has done a great deal of harm to the relationship between truck drivers and frontline enforcement personnel (many of whom, I'd like to believe, don't share their union bosses' opinion), and that serves no one well.

Yes, B.C. or any other jurisdiction needs dedicated and diligent truck enforcement officers. I'm grateful for the work they do keeping the scofflaws at bay and generally out of harm's way, but I won't extend them total credit for trucking's overall good safety record. It's safe and diligent drivers, along with fleets that invest in safety and training that prevent crashes, not a handful of ersatz Wyatt Earps armed with tape measures and calculators.