

Photographs by Marko Georgiev for The New York Times

Oscar Melara observed the line of trucks waiting on Tuesday to pick up containers at Port Newark. Truckers often spend several hours a day in line at port terminals.

A Moving Force, Barely Noticed

Contract Truckers Feed the Ports, for as Little as \$40 a Load

By DAMIEN CAVE

NEWARK — Several truckers who work at Port Newark's sprawling terminals lined up before dawn by the food canteen operated by Aban Pérez.

Seeking dark coffee, a steak sandwich and camaraderie, they shared stories about rising gas prices, accidents and the long waits to pick up loads — just a few of the problems that cut into their modest and unpredictable livelihood as independent truckers who haul containers from the area's bustling ports.

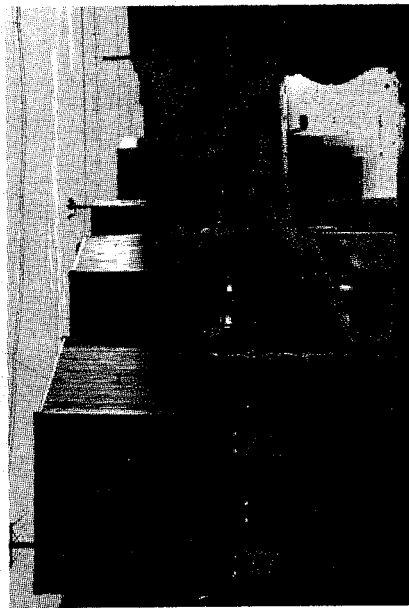
They also spoke about the death of Gilberto Soto, a Teamsters organizer, a regular at the canteen and one of the only advocates the truckers had. Mr. Soto was murdered last month while visiting his mother in El Salvador, and a small shrine to him stands at the canteen, complete with a photograph and a newspaper article in Spanish.

"He was the kind of person who would be here in 30 minutes to get my back if there was a problem," said one trucker, Edison Villacis, 32, who met Mr. Soto in 2000. "We don't have that anymore."

Mr. Villacis is typical of the men and women Mr. Soto sought to help — a largely invisible class of workers who lubricate the region's commercial engine by transporting everything from cars to coffee. A day spent with him provides a window into their lives and struggles.

Mr. Villacis, a father of two, arrived from Ecuador when he was 16. He started driving a truck eight years ago, and he later bought a white 1994 International for \$36,000. He is one of roughly 8,000 men and women who haul imported goods from container terminals in New Jersey and New York

Continued on Page B8



Having received their assignments for the day, truckers waited in line at sunrise for Port Newark to open.