



Dith Pran/The New York Times

A memorial to Gilberto Soto, a Teamster who was killed in El Salvador, in Aban and Rita Pérez's food cart.

The toll for crossing the Goethals Bridge to Staten Island cost Mr. Villacis \$30, and once he arrived he was met by another line and another wait. There, port truckers gathering outside their cabs to smoke said the lines they must navigate add uncertainty and stress. A bad day may mean one haul; a good day perhaps six. Last year, Mr. Villacis says, he made roughly \$25,000.

Maintenance costs are equally unpredictable. Two months after Mr. Villacis spent \$3,400 to replace his

truck's tires, the transmission seized, requiring an immediate \$3,000 replacement.

Not surprisingly, truckers cut costs wherever they can. Mr. Villacis has no health insurance. He is even afraid to sign up for the E-ZPass toll program for fear the charges might grow beyond his ability to pay.

"I'd just rather pay with cash," he said after leaving Staten Island at about 2 p.m., "so I know what I'm spending."

There is an alternative: Experi-

enced truckers like Mr. Villacis could become salaried employees. Because of the recent growth in commerce at the ports, several companies are hiring full-time truckers and providing benefits. But Mr. Villacis and other contractors say the pay tends to be lower and the work more grueling. So while the Teamsters seek a replacement for Mr. Soto, Mr. Villacis simply drives on.

"We don't have a stable income," Mr. Villacis said. "We depend on a machine."