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Big rig driver next to you may soon be teen

Highways across the United States are filled with billboards leased by trucking companies seeking drivers. According to the American Trucking Association, there is a shortage of 50,000 drivers as a low-end estimate.

Seaport Global Securities, a New York-based investment bank, estimates that the shortage could be closer to 100,000 drivers with projections that could reach upward of 180,000 drivers by 2026.

According to Kara Deniz, the senior communications manager for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the leading issue of the shortage is turnover. "Turnover is a reflection of poor wages and working conditions, such as being away from families for a long period of time," Deniz said.

Drivers are steering to the closest exit due to stagnant wages, time away from family and drivers today having issues with onboard electronic monitoring and in-cab driver cameras. "Paying \$65,000 to \$75,000 would get [drivers] interested. We spend a lot of time talking about culture, but the money has to be there, too," according to Brian Fielkow, CEO of Jetco Delivery, a Houston-based carrier.

Trucking companies are certainly profitable. Currently, there are seven trucking companies on the Fortune 500 list, which does not include Fortune 500 companies such as Walmart

and Amazon, to name a few, which although are not designated as trucking companies, maintain vast trucking operations.

For example, Walmart owns close to 6,000 tractor trucks. If designated as a trucking company instead of a retail chain, Walmart would fall just outside the top 10 largest trucking companies in the country.

Instead of trucking companies increasing driver pay to retain and attract skilled drivers, trucking companies have recently again sought to deregulate the industry by urging the government to lower the required age from 21 to 18 to operate a commercial vehicle interstate.

It is without question that 80,000-pound tractor trucks are the most dangerous vehicles on our roads. Instead of exploring the connection between increasing driver pay to recruit and re-

tain more experienced drivers, the Trump administration is in the process of implementing a pilot program to lower the interstate truck driving age to 18.

This decision is masked as an effort to promote job growth and increase commerce; however, one should question whether



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there is a hidden agenda to hire younger drivers, those who by age simply have less driving experience, if any, that would be willing to work for lesser wages in comparison to a middle-aged driver with more financial responsibilities.

As the law now stands, one must be 21 years of age to operate a commercial vehicle across state lines. The pilot program,

The program will allow a limited number of 18- to 20-year-old drivers to participate if they have received "heavy-vehicle driver training and experience in the military" and are sponsored by a participating motor carrier.

As part of the pilot program, the federal carrier safety administration will compare safety records of the study group's participating drivers to records from a control group of comparable size, composed of drivers 21 to 24 years old who have a commercial driver's license and comparable training and experience.

Here, the federal agency plans to compare performance across the two groups to determine whether age is a critical safety factor. In March 2018, the DRIVE Safe Act was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives. The measure directs the Transportation Department to issue regulations relating to an apprenticeship program for licensed commercial motor vehicle drivers under 21.

Aside from implementing a program that will use our citizens and highways as crash test dummies, the glaring effect here is the government taking steps to deregulate the industry, seeking to place an 18-year-old behind the wheel of an 80,000-pound tractor truck, which certainly will have an effect on safety, as the price for "no substitute for experience" is apparently too steep for the trucking industry.

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to be implemented by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration will conduct a 36-month program to study the "feasibility, benefits and safety impacts of allowing 18- to 20-year-old drivers to operate commercial motor vehicles in interstate commerce."