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XPO's Jacobs misremembers European labor relations

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European unions were dumbfounded when XPO Logistics CEO Bradley S. Jacobs announced at the JOC's 17th Annual TPM Conference that he believes in “some unions” and that “in Europe we have a cordial, respectful, courteous [labor relationship], it works well, it's very functional.”

Clearly, Jacobs has forgotten about his encounter with XPO employees and union representatives from the United Kingdom, Belgium, France, and the United States at the company's 2016 shareholder meeting in Connecticut. These worker-leaders, representing XPO workers from nine countries and 15 unions allied through the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), asked Jacobs to engage in meaningful dialogue over the company's labor practices and standards around the globe — Jacobs refused because the Teamsters were included. But workers from Europe did not take the extraordinary step of attending XPO's shareholder meeting on a whim, because there are serious labor problems around the globe. One of the French XPO workers countered, “We are one union family.”

When Jacobs purchased Norbert Dentressangle, he promised employees there would be no job cuts in France for 18 months. It didn't take Jacobs long to break his promise, quickly closing two locations and laying off workers affiliated with the CFDT union. The result was a strike by XPO workers in France that was prolonged because “Management ... declined to sit down with us and discuss our grievances.” That sounds like the opposite of a “respectful” and “courteous” relationship.

And perhaps Jacobs missed the news in Guadalajara, Spain, where an XPO worker went on a 10-day hunger strike to protest a scheme very similar to what XPO port drivers in the United States face: misclassification and exploitation as independent. Rebuffed in its attempt to meet with management regarding the rights and basic working conditions for 1,000 workers there, the Spanish union — UGT — resorted to holding weekly rallies and a two-day strike.

And recently in the United Kingdom, reports surfaced of potentially illegal “flex” labor contracts and stressed that workers were denied regular toilet or water breaks at a 4,000-worker warehouse managed by XPO for fashion group ASOS. An investigation by Member of Parliament Iain Wright called the conditions exploitative and questioned whether they were in violation of the law.

Strikes, layoffs, misclassification, low pay, inhumane working conditions, and denial of freedom of association at XPO facilities across Europe are hardly the hallmark of the “cordial relations” Jacobs has proclaimed. Indeed, they mirror XPO's dismal US labor practices. Further, Jacobs' strident anti-union behavior and rhetoric only fuels and inflames more conflict.

XPO spends lavishly on “union avoidance” consultants and expensive attorneys to intimidate XPO freight drivers who seek, overcome, and have won Teamster representation in order to improve working conditions and gain fair pay and affordable health insurance. Instead of spending more on litigating the results, Jacobs should sit down and negotiate a fair union contract.

XPO's US warehouse workers are poorly paid and made contingent through staffing agency hiring, but global unions cheered when workers in Connecticut — who package and distribute parts for military helicopters to governments all over the world for merely \$12 an hour — fought back and voted to become Teamsters.

Getting labor laws enforced is a challenge for workers worldwide, and transportation unions around the globe are sounding the alarm. In the United States, XPO drayage/intermodal drivers are demanding an end to wage theft in the form of deductions for fuel, insurance, lease payments, etc. We have seen their meager — even negative — paychecks and seek an end to the ravages of illegal driver misclassification on both sides of the Atlantic. Unfortunately, Jacobs — who faces an exploding volume of wage theft litigation and untold millions in financial liability — refuses to comply with labor laws.

This has left XPO drivers with no other recourse than to engage in multiple strikes at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach to protest these unfair conditions.

Finally, Jacobs' threat at the TPM conference to replace us with autonomous vehicles and robots so we don't “fall asleep at the wheel,” “take breaks,” or seek union representation is far from “respectful” and “courteous.” Plus, this viewpoint is short-sighted. To adapt a quote from Henry Ford, we ask, “Can driverless trucks purchase the goods they're delivering?”

We urge Jacobs to fix not only the relationship in Europe, but also in the United States, because it is not “working well.” A path towards greater productivity and greater shareholder value can be achieved through constructive engagement with all its unions across the globe. Jacobs is on a fools' errand if he thinks he can divide and conquer us by country and by union. XPO is a global company, and his employees are united globally through the ITF to achieve good jobs. We call on Jacobs to engage with us to pursue a better path for XPO's long-term success.

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