Don’t Get Caught Between a Truck and a Hard Place



The space between a loading dock and a truck trailer is one of the most dangerous in any plant.

Usually about six inches (15.24 centimeters) wide, this space has been the scene of many fatal accidents. Forklifts cross from the dock into trailers over adjustable steel bridges called dock levelers. If a trailer moves away from the dock, a forklift can tumble to the ground, crushing its operator.

What’s at Stake:

Trucks can suddenly move forward for a number of reasons. They can slide on ice, snow or mud built up around the dock, or on hot asphalt. The brakes can fail. Perhaps the brakes were not set or the wheels were not chocked to prevent movement. Or the driver can make a mistake and pull away from the loading dock before the forklift is clear.

Trailer creep is the term describing slight movement of a truck trailer away from the dock. Premature departure is the term used to describe leaving the dock too soon, possibly as a result of wrong or misunderstood directions. In fact, driver impatience because of delivery schedules has been shown to be a significant factor in more than a few loading dock accidents.

So the presence of a dock leveler is no guarantee of a safe surface for a forklift. A better system involves a vehicle restraint to secure trailers and reduce the chances of premature separation from the loading dock.

What Can Go Wrong:

A truck driver felt that he hadn’t backed a trailer straight enough against a loading dock, so he decided to pull out and back in again. Unaware that his truck was already being unloaded, he pulled away from the dock. A forklift driver was just backing out of the trailer at the time. The forklift and driver fell off the trailer. Fortunately, the worker was not seriously injured.

How to Protect Yourself:

If you work around a loading dock as a driver, forklift operator or in another capacity, make sure you understand the hazards and know how to protect yourself and others. Forklift incidents can easily result in death or serious injury to operators and pedestrians. Falls caused by slippery dock surfaces or unguarded edges can be serious as well. Any workers who manually lift and carry materials are also at risk for disabling back injuries.

Consider these loading dock safety tips:

- As a driver, you need to observe and obey signals, whether they originate from dockworkers or from automatic lights telling you when to back in or move forward. Cooperate with the vehicle restraint procedures in force at the dock. You also need to stick to pedestrian lanes when you leave your truck, and remain in the driver waiting area as instructed.
- As a dockworker, you need to know how to safely restrain a trailer—using, but not relying on—automatic signaling. Use a dock leveler correctly and never tamper with the safety stop device intended to prevent free-fall. If using chocks, place them yourself instead of leaving this job to the driver. Chocks should be chained to the dock. Inspect and maintain dock equipment regularly.
- Dockworkers should use materials handling equipment to avoid back injury. Only trained and authorized persons should operate forklifts. Beware of pinchpoint and entanglement hazards around dock conveyors.
- Maintain good lighting and keep surfaces free of grease, mud, snow or ice to prevent falls. Always use the steps and the handrail to exit the dock. Do not jump to the ground from a dock or trailer.
- As a forklift operator, wear your seatbelt. Many forklift drivers have been crushed to death when they felt a forklift starting to fall and tried to jump free.

Final Word

Work happens quickly around a loading dock, as shipments arrive and are handled on tight schedules. But no matter how fast things move for just-in-time shipping, you should always make time for safety.