Branches are now forming in New York, Chicago and other cities as the women-in-trucking phenomenon spreads everywhere. Coalition members come in all ages, sizes, shapes and backgrounds. Most are in their twenties and thirties, some in their fifties, with a surprisingly high educational level. Many have attended college, some have earned degrees and even a Master's degree in social work is represented. To the working woman, trucking offers an opportunity to earn big money and be one's own boss of the road.

During the first year of its life, the Coalition scored some notable victories. They won several suits over discriminatory hiring practices and are moving to open up the entire industry. A monthly newsletter — COALITION CONVOY — reports ongoing activity, lists the trucking firms currently hiring drivers and keeps log books on every woman who applies. By documenting any pattern of discrimination, they apply leverage and legal pressure on an industry that has historically looked on women as warm bodies to use and "mamas" to come home to.

“We have no choice,” a Coalition officer said. “They are not going to roll over and play dead for us, not when there's so much money at stake.”

No denying that the money is big and lots of drivers are making it. On a recent trip up Interstate 5, I stopped at truck stops for lunch and coffees, talking informally to many truckers. They are a friendly lot on the whole, eager to exchange stories of highway conditions, police traps and other useful travel gossip. But when you mention women truckers, the eyes grow hard.

“They're a bunch of broads,” is a common reply.

When you press for their feelings, they may wisecrack how a woman's place is at home or on her back "breathin' hard." But if you persist, you finally hear — "Hey, man, it's our jobs they're after — and I'll give it to them over my dead body!"

It's money that keeps things mean, and trucking means big money. The Teamster's new contract calls for driver pay starting at $8 an hour — and in trucking a 40-hour week is just the sleeping time. Most drivers log lots of overtime so that $500 weekly paychecks are common. Even non-union, cross-country runs pay close to these rates, with the added incentive of earning even more overtime.

That's what the bellowing is really all about from the haulers, their trade magazines and the unions. Women truckers are on the move and the men don't like it. The new breed of woman is showing up more and more — in the courts, the media and — where it counts most — in the left front seats of those freight-trains on wheels ruling the nation's highways.

Teamster official Muniz signals the future when he observed — “Let's face it, it's the coming thing. Women drivers are doing a hell of a job and we've accepted that fact. You can bet there's going to be more and more of it, too.”

Gina Farelli Dodson refuses to be defined by men. Dark-haired and golden eyed, with a playful streak that gets her laughing at her own jokes, this 28-year-old trucker missed teaching at some Colorado high school by a scant 17 college units.

“I dropped out of Colorado State in 1968,” she recalls. “Until I was nineteen I was into competitive swimming and gymnastics, so I majored in P.E. My whole family is into college — one older brother's a lawyer, another's a broker and my kid brother is studying marine biology.

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"When I came out of high school, every girl was going to college to get into social work or become a P.E. teacher. So I just went along with it. But by the end of '67 when I would have graduated, there was a glut of P.E. teachers. I had friends coming out of State taking jobs as recreational assistants for $3 an hour. I couldn't see that for myself, so I quit cold. All I needed was fourteen units of student teaching and three units of psychology of education. But I don't need any degree to drive this truck, and I make a hell of a lot more money than any P.E. teachers.

"My boyfriend was a driver so I asked him to teach me. At first he said no but I kept after him. He sneaked around after hours and between times to teach me enough so I could get a job. That experience enabled me to get a license and a better job with a union company running between Los Angeles and San Francisco. I lasted seven months there and then got laid off with all the other 15 drivers, all men except me."

Gina loves driving and sees her truck as her home.

"I want to be proud of it. I keep it neat so when I pull into a truck stop and open that door, I won't have 8,000 McDonald wrappers rolling on the ground. When you run cross country, you live in these things. This is your house, it's a small house so you have to keep it immaculate.

"Every day on the road I stop for a shower and put my makeup on. And I always drive in decent clothes, never in super-grubbies. I take dress clothes along because half the fun of this job is being able to visit different places, all the big cities. When I get to New York, for instance, I go to nice restaurants like the 21 Club or El Morocco, chic places. If it calls for pretty pantsuits or a nice dress and heels, I've got them with me. Trucking is a big part of my life but having fun and seeing the sights is another big part.

"When I drive I usually wear pants, a sports blouse and sandals. I wear boots in the winter time, halter tops and cutoffs in the summer, and I completely blow people away with how I look. When I get out there to work, they say - 'Wow, not only is she pretty but she sure can drive a truck!'"

"When you do a good job, the older drivers — the real pros — they get behind you 100 per cent. It's the guys between 28 and 35 who are the worst. They haven't had much more cross-country experience than the women out there, but they have that cocky attitude about life and they want to get you in the sleeper before they say hello. Whereas the guys 55 years old and older know you're out there doing a job. They've had it rougher than the drivers do now so they're willing to help you if you put out the effort."

Gina worked for the Frontier Marketing Co-op in Montebello, California, so I visited their yard. Sam Runnels is the safety director for Frontier. A 60-year-old veteran of the super slabs, Runnels has a tough, lined face, white hair and sharp blue eyes. He has nothing but praise for Gina's professionalism.

"She's a better driver than 90 per cent of the guys on the road," he said. "I've been testing drivers here for 15 years and we flunk about 20 per cent of them straight out. But Gina gets into a truck and there's not a bit of nervousness with her like there is with many of the guys. She knows what she's doing and she does it well. Gina's definitely one of the best drivers we've ever had."

Gina's family is delighted with her career in trucking. Beyond the big paychecks, there's that new frontier quality they all admire.

"My mother, who's been liberated for years, thinks my being a truckdriver is fantastic," Gina says. "And so do my dad and grandmother. Twenty years from now I'd like to own my own trucks running produce cross-country. I'm going to own a fleet, five or ten trucks anyway. And I want to be boss so I can give other women the opportunities I've had. Believe me, there's no job in the world that can match driving a truck!"