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Britain, Vietnam, Canada, Teamsters: Excerpts from Ernest Tate's 'Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s & 60s'

Wednesday 7 May 2014, by [HEARSE Phil](#), [TATE "Ernie" Ernest](#) (Date first published: 5 March 2014).

March 5, 2014 — *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — Resistance Books (Britain) has kindly given permission for *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* to publish excerpts from long-time Canadian revolutionary socialist Ernie Tate's just-published two-volume memoirs, *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s & 60s*. *Links* readers are urged to order a copy; to do so email terryconway@tiscali.co.uk.

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Preface by Phil Hearse

It's a great pleasure to write the preface for Volume II of Ernie Tate's memoirs of the 1950s and '60s. I first met Ernie and his partner Jess MacKenzie in 1967, when I was part of a small group of young socialists from the London Borough of Ealing recruited to the International Marxist Group (IMG). So it's the British part of the story that I know well.

Ernie and Jess were, together with Pat Jordan, the IMG full timers in London, working out of a cramped office and bookshop in Toynbee Street in the East End of London. This book is a vivid account of what were fateful days in establishing the modern revolutionary left in Britain and is full of valuable lessons. What grabs the reader's attention is the creativity and sheer audacity of this tiny group of people, setting out to make a major political impact with almost no resources—and succeeding.

Until the middle 1960s the organised far left in Britain, such as it was, was dominated by Gerry Healy's Socialist Labour League—itself only a few hundred members. The SLL was ultra-sectarian with hardly any notion of the united front; in fact it was the reflection of third period Stalinism inside the Trotskyist movement. And its internal norms were highly authoritarian, even by the standards of today's 'democratic centralist' organisations. Against the SLL, the forerunners of the main organisations of the far left in Britain today were small and weak.

What started to change the situation was the new world and British context that developed in the

mid-1960s. While the trade union movement was beginning to flex its muscles in the shop stewards movement, the militant socialist left had hardly any implantation among them. But the rise of a movement against the Vietnam War and the emergence of the student movement began to change things and lay the basis for a new kind of left. The role of the IMG in that was crucial.

At the beginning of 1967 the IMG was—through using united front tactics and through its Labour Party work—playing a role way out of proportion to its size, just a few dozen comrades. The weekly bulletin it sponsored—*The Week*—was widely read in the Labour and trade union left. It was the main organizing force in the emerging Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC). And two of its members, Ken Coates and Tony Topham, were the leaders of the Institute for Workers Control (IWC), whose conferences and pamphlets began to popularise the idea of workers control that had received scant attention in the existing Communist Party and Labour left, or the SLL for that matter. As explained in this volume, the IMG and especially Ernie took on a crucial organising role in relation to the international Bertrand Russell Vietnam war crimes tribunal.

The decisive thing here in bringing a new left into existence was the VSC. The initiative to set it up in 1966 was taken by the IMG, but the International Socialists soon came in, without however taking much in the way of organisational responsibility. The decision to set it up was not so obvious: the Communist Party-led British Council for Peace in Vietnam, organised on the slogan of negotiations rather than American withdrawal, dominated the scene as far as this issue was concerned. The small group of comrades in the IMG leadership assessed that in the newly emerging student movement and beyond that the idea of solidarity with those in struggle, a clearly partisan campaign which stood with the oppressed and their fighting force, the National Liberation Front, could gain an echo.

It fact signs of that echo could be heard in the Oxford University 1965 teach in on Vietnam where Ralph Miliband, father of Ed and David, got a warm reception for a fighting intervention calling not for peace but for solidarity with “the heroic men and women of the National Liberation Front”.

Widespread outrage at the genocidal brutality of American imperialism in Vietnam spurred teach-ins and protests throughout the student movement. In the fall of 1967 Jess and Ernie attended a conference in Brussels in which the German Socialist Students League (SDS) and French Revolutionary Young Communists (JCR) played a central role. When they reported back they were astonished at the political sophistication and militancy of this newly emerging European revolutionary left. The Brussels conference prepared the way for the February 1968 European Vietnam conference and a demonstration in Berlin, where thousands of young people astonished the local populace by marching behind banners of Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Che Guevara. A new left was emerging and the Fourth International played an important role in its birth.

The amazing range of political projects the IMG was at the centre of at the beginning of 1967 contained important contradictions that were soon to emerge, and Ernie and Jess were at the heart of the political debates they caused. The main public figure of the IMG, although he played little internal role, was Ken Coates. The story of his split with the IMG is told here so I won't anticipate, except to say that there were two main related questions involved. The first was what attitude to take to left wing trade union leaders like Jack Jones, Frank Cousins and Ernie Roberts with whom the IMG was working. When the I.M.G. felt that the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) had sold out the London dockers, Ken Coates wanted no criticism because, he argued, it would harm the working relationships inside the IWC.

Ken Coates began to see the IMG not as a revolutionary organisation but as a support network to his activities with the Labour Party and trade union left wings. As such he wasn't interested in building the IMG and was actively hostile to the west London teenagers just recruited who he regarded as ultra-left. IMG members were useful for doing to donkey work in producing *The Week* at Labour

Party conferences, but not much regarded as comrades in a joint revolutionary enterprise.

The IMG was facing another basic problem linked to the conflict with Coates. The new left that the Vietnam war and the student movement were bringing into existence, was not much interested in work in the Labour Party. The IMG was recruiting students who wanted to build an open revolutionary organisation, while the official position of the organisation was still entrism. Between 1967-9 the tiny IMG leadership group, based really on Ernie Tate and Pat Jordan, was faced with very difficult organisational and political questions that would have important bearings on the future of the British revolutionary left.

Given the youth of the comrades involved they did an extraordinary job, but of course they made some mistakes. Necessarily the comrades led the turn away from entrism, although inevitably it led to some losses, including eventually some comrades who helped to set up *Labour Briefing*.

Through the VSC their working relationship with some of the members of the *New Left Review* editorial board, particularly Robin Blackburn, Quintin Hoare and Branka Magas became closer. Crucially the organisation recruited the comrade who was for much of the public the main face of the youth and student movements, Tariq Ali. Some very talented young comrades—for example Peter Gowan—were recruited from the universities. These people together with John Wheal were central in setting up *The Black Dwarf* a broad based revolutionary newspaper in 1969. The I.M.G. could be said to have had a 'strategic majority' on its editorial board and it helped to expand the audience of the IMG.

The emerging radicalisation went into hyper-drive in 1968, with the Tet offensive in Vietnam, the Prague Spring but of course mainly the May-June events in France involving the biggest general strike in history and the role of revolutionaries on a mass scale for the first time in Europe since the '20s and '30s. Another piece of good luck for the IMG was the role of the JCR, led by Fourth Internationalists like Alain Krivine and Daniel Bensaid, in the French events.

IMG women were closely involved in setting up the first conference in Oxford of the 'new' women's liberation movement and in establishing a journal of socialist feminism, *Socialist Woman*, at a time when the whole issue was disregarded by most of the left.

Ernie and Jess went back to Canada in 1969. When they left they had helped to lead the IMG into a totally new position, which in turn influenced the future of the whole far left. The SLL had been seen off as a significant force because its sectarianism repelled the new generation. The united front was established as crucial theme and mechanism for struggle. Solidarity with the colonial revolution, particularly Vietnam and Cuba, were themes pioneered by the Group. Links with the Fourth International—including its North American component—were crucial in the IMG's strongly internationalist profile, which in turn was a key part of its attraction to new recruits. The IMG was strongly identified with the new movements of the oppressed like the women's movement and black liberation and anti-racists movements. All these things were to echo loudly through the far left in Britain as it developed subsequently.

But there were clouds on the horizon. Entrism in the Labour Party had given the IMG an automatic link up with the labour movement. How to deepen that link as a public organisation was a constant source of debate and infighting in subsequent years.

Ernie here alludes to another problem. While the IMG's membership shot up from a few dozen to several hundred, the International Socialists' membership shot up from a few hundred to more than 1,000 by the end of 1969. In 1969 the Internationalist Socialist leader Tony Cliff approached the IMG with a fusion proposal that would have included the IMG comrades keeping their links with the

Fourth International and with the right to publishing material internally and having access to the I.S. journals.

Ernie reveals here that he was in favour of accepting this proposal, but it was strongly opposed by Pat Jordan. Being on the verge of going back to Canada he felt in no position to put up a political fight when he would not be around to lead the organisation if he won his position. I think Ernie was absolutely right on the issue of a fusion with the I.S.; the whole history of the British far left over forty years could have been quite different if the IMG had taken another course.

For comrades in the militant left today, itself faced with how to take forward fundamental socialist principles through an incredibly complex social and political situation, Ernie's account is not just a fascinating look at the past, but full of insights and lessons for the future.

Phil Hearse

Introduction by Ernest Tate

The years I write about in these pages were indeed heady and optimistic times for socialists, especially as we neared the latter part of the Sixties.

Many of us even began to toss around the idea of "socialism in our time" because the political conditions seemed to be very promising as the ruling classes in many countries appeared to be losing whatever little moral authority they possessed over people. At any moment, one could expect news of an uprising somewhere in the world that put socialism on the agenda. There hasn't been a radical period like it. Those fifteen years saw the rise of the black civil rights movement in the United States, the beginning of the Quebecois struggle for independence in Canada, the victory of the Cuban Revolution and the rise in North America and Britain of massive resistance to the Vietnam War—which undoubtedly, helped bring an end to that war. In Paris, the tumultuous events of May 1968 were but a symptom of a general rise in political consciousness throughout Europe that even reached into Czechoslovakia, where mass opposition to Stalinism ran so deep, the Warsaw Pact countries under Moscow's leadership, invaded that country with hundreds of thousands of troops to violently suppress it.

It was a period of momentous radical upsurge that even saw new actors stride onto the stage of history. Masses of women demanded equality for the first time in a new feminist upsurge. Large sectors of the population—especially the youth—began to question the very logic of capitalism at a time when relatively small Marxist groups found a new and ever larger audience for revolutionary ideas and who, because of their political skill, agility, and passionate sense of solidarity with the colonial revolution, were able to help bring thousands people onto the streets in major cities everywhere in angry protests against the foreign policies of their governments.

This account is not a "history" of our organization during those years. Of necessity, I have been selective, and include only those activities that may be of special interest to the reader, or those activities in which I had been especially involved. I do not deal with all our campaigns of those years, only the major ones. For example, very little is mentioned here about our activities—very important ones—in developing solidarity with the Algerian revolution, nor do I say much about our work in Canada and Britain to support Neville Alexander, a black South African intellectual of the Unity

Movement, jailed by the apartheid regime. Neither do I say anything about our work in Britain to defend Obi Egbuna, a black Nigerian militant, jailed on the basis of a manuscript of a novel the police had seized when they searched his home. They alleged it contained detailed plans for carrying out violence against the state.

Instead, what I have tried to do, not merely relying on my memory but backed up by research in several major public archives, is to give some idea of what it was like to be a new member and subsequently a leader of a revolutionary organization. I was a young unsophisticated class-conscious worker, who knew virtually nothing about socialism, a genuine neophyte, when I became a member of a small group that turned out to be part of the Fourth International that had been founded by Leon Trotsky in the thirties. I joined it not long after most of its members had been expelled from the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), which the group's members had joined on the basis that the CCF, a social democratic party "represented a form of labour party" in Canada. The group was in the process of setting up the Socialist Education League (SEL) and producing the first issue of its monthly journal, the Workers Vanguard, when I came across it for the first time. I describe the group's daily life, how it functioned in some detail and even how it ran its membership meetings. I include its major personalities and its political activity as it tried to increase its influence and the special efforts it made to try and make up for the fact that as an organization, it only existed in two cities, Toronto and Vancouver.

For example, to compensate for this lack of representation elsewhere, every two years it organized a tour across the vast interior of Canada that often lasted up to six months. I participated in several of these and I have tried to describe what that entailed.

I also discuss how our organization viewed the formation of the New Democratic Party (NDP) at the beginning of the Sixties as it replaced the CCF, and how the change was resisted by the CCF in the west, which had moved to the left under Hazen Argue on the issues of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the nationalization of industry. I also describe our experiences in the trade unions, especially the International Brotherhood of Teamsters where we became the centre of a rank-and-file caucus in opposition to a Jimmy Hoffa-imposed trusteeship. This put us in the position of leading several Ontario wide wildcat strikes, some of which lasted many weeks and did not end too well. As far as I know, this is the first time this record has been written up in any detail.

The Cuban Revolution when it took place at the end of the fifties, although a bit of a surprise, was nevertheless, a big deal for us. I describe how we organized to defend it against a right-wing propaganda offensive designed to quarantine it from the Canadian people. One of the most successful campaigns of its kind in the English-speaking world, there was broad support for it in the unions, in the newly formed NDP and on university campuses. Under the leadership of Verne Olson and his wife Ann, both of whom I knew personally and who were among the more experienced members of our group, we set up the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC). I relate some of the difficulties that Verne ran into in dealing with representatives of the Cuban government when the Committee was in the process of organizing students to tour the island. How we carried out our support for Cuba, would become a template later for how we built opposition to the Vietnam War.

Ernest Tate

Chapter 8: The Teamsters

Not long after our little breakthrough in Amalgamated Electric, the SEL was soon faced with a much bigger opportunity to engage in more impressive trade union work, in a totally unexpected union, the Teamsters. According to Ross, it was “the biggest thing that I remember having happened to our Canadian movement.” All told, in the late fifties as I remember it, and ironically for a self-professed working class organization, we still didn’t have that many of our members in unions and certainly had no concentration of members in any particular local of a union. In addition to our few people in Amalgamated Electric, Hugh Dowson was in de Havilland Aircraft, and we also had a few people from time to time in General Steelwares, a large plant south of Gerard Street near the Don River in Toronto’s East End. Ken Sutherland and a couple of our members had gotten jobs there, but the plant was organized by the Steelworkers’ Union and under the firm control of a clique of right-wing social democrats. Ken reported that its monthly membership meetings would very often barely have a quorum of members in attendance.

Once we stood a good chance of getting a couple of militants onto the Executive Board, but we unfortunately suffered an embarrassing set-back when one of our members who was running for the Executive was arrested by a plain-clothed cop on the street just outside the plant. He had taken a Globe and Mail newspaper from its box without paying for it, and was fired when the company heard about it. It was a petty and quite dumb thing to do, something he had done many times before, he later told us. As a result, our opponents very happily spread the gossip about this incident throughout the plant, helping to torpedo our efforts to get on the Local’s Executive. I remember how we were acutely embarrassed by it and of course it set us back quite a bit. Getting our members established in the plant in the first place hadn’t been easy, by any means. In those depressed times, even when we would finally manage to get someone into a targeted plant, there would often be layoffs and they would be quickly out on the street again, the result of the policy of “last hired, first fired.” We also had a couple of people—Joe Rosenblatt comes to mind—working at Canadian Pacific Railway on the loading dock in Toronto, but none of this compared to what happened in the Teamsters as the decade came to an end. It was one of the few times in those years when our group made a focused effort to get as many members as possible into a specific union local of a specific industry.

As the decade came to a close, Toronto became the focal point for a series of wildcat strikes in the trucking industry throughout Ontario. It was a time of great turmoil in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters which was undergoing a deep crisis, its membership in a state of revolt, especially in Ontario where many of its locals were under trusteeship, the most egregious case being that of a large Windsor local of some 5,800 members that had been in trusteeship for an amazing fourteen years and another large local in Toronto, with over 5,500 members, that had been in trusteeship for more than a year. The union’s head office in Washington had been under investigation by the Labour Department for corruption and as a result, in February 1958, under a court order, Jimmy Hoffa was forced out of office and replaced by a government appointed “board of monitors” that promptly began an anti-union campaign that lasted twenty- seven months, carried out under the guise of “getting Hoffa,” all the while delaying a convention that ostensibly it had been put in place to organize. In the meantime, the Hoffa machine was still in control, with many of its locals in Ontario suffering under his trusteeships.

Our initial involvement in the Teamsters came about, not as a result of some grand strategy on our part but out of the simple, economic necessity of one of our members who happened to be desperate for a job.

Wally Mitchell, Jim’s younger brother, was very broke and needed money in a hurry. He had come up to Toronto from Montreal to look for work. I remember it very well because in order to help make

ends meet, Ken Sutherland, Alan Harris and I had shared a large apartment at the corner of Glenholme Avenue and St. Clair Avenue West—the building is still there—and Wally was staying with us for a while until he could find work and have his own place. He got a job almost immediately as a driver for a bottling plant, delivering Coca-Cola to convenience stores around the city and he quickly let Harry Paine, who happened to be looking for work at the same time, know there were job openings. By July 1959, Harry found himself in Smith Transport, a subsidiary of the Canadian Pacific Railways and one of the largest trucking companies in the country. As luck would have it, this happened to be one the main sites of Teamster anti-administration activity in the city. Confusion seemed to reign throughout the union, Harry and Wally told us. We soon found out that there were at least three opposition factions in the locals, the eponymous Davidson, McTaggart and Nealan caucuses, plus a grouping of supporters of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transportation and General Workers union, (CBRT), who were calling for affiliation instead to their union, all of these groupings arrayed to various degrees against a pro- Jimmy Hoffa machine that was in control of the central union apparatus.

Strikes seemed to be happening every other week, often against the companies and even occasionally against the Locals' administrators, mainly over the trusteeships Hoffa had imposed and the resulting feeble contracts that had been signed with the companies with virtually no input from the membership. As the turmoil spread, Wally and Harry kept bringing back first-hand accounts of what was going on. Right away, the SEL's trade union committee—mainly pressured by Ross Dowson— began to look for others in our group who could try their luck at finding jobs as drivers so that they could become active in what for us was a promising situation, or as we would commonly say to ourselves, "play a role and try and give some leadership in the struggle." Alan Harris and George Bryant soon got jobs there. Both had the driver's license requirement that allowed them to drive large trucks and soon they were followed by others who got jobs working in the trucking barns, with the common sense advice that all of them refrain from union activity until they were through their probation, which was usually three months. One thing we quickly noted about the Teamster membership was that while there would be great militancy on the job, because the barns were scattered across the city, they were very difficult for the union to service, and as a consequence had a small measure of independence from the bureaucracy. In addition, most of the workers had a very tenuous connection to the union, quite unlike in a factory setting where the workers would usually all be in one location. One of the advantages of this situation was that support for the leadership in the membership was often very thin.

By the spring of 1960, Ken McTaggart, the Business Agent for Teamster Local 514, had succeeded in rallying the local's members to oppose the trusteeship and had persuaded the Ontario government to intervene and force new elections, all of which provided a marvelous opening for our few members. The emergence from trusteeship allowed us to participate in the election as an organized force as we joined with other militants to challenge the Local's old leadership. It was a small and promising beginning foray into the union, but in that election the votes were never counted. A former Local president appealed to the courts and successfully challenged the proceedings. He had been unjustly disqualified from running by a Hoffa-appointed trustee.

Around this time we met up for the first time with Joe Hendsbee, a socialist activist, an American who had recently come from Boston and who had gained a very good reputation in the membership for his militancy. It was unusual for our group to meet an individual such as him, because in those days radical socialists in the labour movement were few and far between. Politically he considered himself a Marxist and had been on the periphery of the LPP for a while. At first he was a little leery of the SEL but because of our class struggle approach to the union's problems, there was soon a meeting of minds. He would shortly go on to join the SEL, playing a pivotal role over the next few years in helping us build a radical opposition to the Hoffa machine. Later he would be thrown out of

his job and black-listed from the trucking industry in Ontario and forced to move to Vancouver where he pitched in to help build the SEL, before eventually parting company with us. Meeting up with Hendsbee had made it easier for us to make contact with many other militants and very quickly we were able to set up a small, but tightly organized opposition caucus, called the "Forward With Democracy" (FWD) caucus. Soon it had about fifty rank and file members attending its meetings—that were open to everyone—that and its very existence began to change everything. Not only was it arguing for democracy and better wages and membership control and criticizing how the union was being run, but it was also contesting for leadership with the other three competing opposition groupings, all of whom seemed to be struggling with each other to see who could get control in a typical case of the "outs" fighting the "ins."

When the election finally rolled around, it took place in the midst of an orgy of red-baiting initiated by Ken McDougall, Washington's candidate to take over, against the FWD's slate of candidates, headed up by Bill Davidson. Since the earlier aborted election, he had thrown his lot in with the FWD to challenge the Hoffa machine. It was a hard fight during which we began to produce the first of a four-page, monthly tabloid, named FWD, edited by Hendsbee, which just about discombobulated the McDougall gang. Despite a virulent red-baiting offensive against us, however, we came very close to defeating him. McDougall won by a margin of only 43 votes in a field of seven candidates and it was by no means a clean sweep for him. FWD managed to achieve a toehold on the union's Executive Board by having several members of its slate elected to it, including that of trustee. But most importantly, the election had brought to an end the Hoffa enforced trusteeship and had opened the Local up to the possibility—for the first time in many years—of a more vigorous internal life that would see the membership challenge the leadership's policies time and time again, and sometimes defeat them.

By February 1962, we had produced another issue of FWD in an attempt to break the union brass' monopoly of news about an impending contract fight. Not many Locals in those days had their own union paper so this was a bit of a novelty, a first step we always argued if the rank and file was to get control of their union. It was clear, the paper had filled a vacuum and as a result, the caucus quickly increased its influence across the union.

One of the largest wildcat strikes in which we had a significant role in those years happened in the summer of 1962 when eight thousand Ontario truckers spontaneously shut down their company barns to immediately link up with thousands of Quebec truckers who had walked out a few days earlier. Trucking in Ontario was paralyzed for six weeks. The key demand was a \$2.50 hourly wage with a contract for two years. The wild-cat had begun on May 27 when the 2,000 member Teamster local, 938, walked out in defiance of McDougall who had been in negotiations with the trucking companies since the previous October and was manoeuvring to get the membership to accept a contract that it had earlier rejected.

It all began at a mass meeting in Toronto's Scarborough Arena, where McDougall failed to get his angry membership to accept a government appointed conciliator's report. FWD supporters were in the forefront in opposing the negotiating committee's capitulation and during the course of the stormy mass gathering—punctuated by many fist-fights provoked by goons brought in to Toronto by Hoffa's people for the occasion. Supporters of FWD were accused from the platform by McDougall of being "splitters," among other heinous crimes. Eventually, when the vote was finally taken on a Labour Department conciliator's report, McDougall refused to allow the ballots to be counted, telling his angry members they would be counted the following day. At which point, the members, deeply suspicious, and having none of it, stormed out of the hall and immediately launched a wildcat strike. Not that long after, on June 5, in the Palace Pier, a large dance hall on Toronto's lakeshore, another attempt was made by the brass to get the rank and file to end their wild-cat strike and accept another conciliator's report that turned out to be much the same as the old one, but again it was

soundly rejected. With that rebuff, McDougall turned to the assembled members to inform them that in future, the negotiating committee would have the final say on contract terms, without their input. "Days of big wage increases have gone," he had informed everyone.

That 1962 strike was led entirely by the Strike Committee, which was in the hands of the militants. It had immediately organized flying squads made up of rank and file members to keep the trucking barns shutdown and the trucks off the road. But the companies refused to budge and were encouraged to do so by the union's Washington head office, which we believed was in cahoots with the employers' association in opposing the strike. The strike lasted six weeks but finally the 8,500 workers were forced back to work and accepted a contract not that much different from the original conciliator's report they had overwhelmingly rejected before the strike had begun. Union staff had done everything in their power to sabotage it, even to the extent of encouraging the companies to keep their barns open. Strike pay was cut off for the members and the strike was declared illegal by Washington, by which time McDougall had effectively dissolved the Strike Committee by the simple method of not calling any more meetings. He immediately put an end to the strike bulletins he had been pressured into issuing and proceeded to break the long standing unity of the Toronto Locals by unilaterally signing contracts with individual companies and without even a membership vote, to end the strike. It was a bitter defeat for the membership.

By 1966, as the much criticized four-year contract with the trucking employers came to an end, a new mood of militancy among workers could be seen throughout Ontario in a wave of strikes in the auto, steel and other industries. It also found its expression, as was to be expected, throughout the Teamsters' union, but especially in Local 938, where many League for Socialist Action (LSA) members were active. The central issue in the negotiations as the old contract came to an end was a demand for the scrapping of the forty-eight hour week and its replacement with the forty-hour week. When Ken McDougall, who chaired the joint negotiating committee for the five Ontario locals, reached an agreement with the employers that fell far short of that demand, and instead was proposing the acceptance of a forty-three and a half hour work week to come into effect three years hence, an angry Teamsters' membership revolted when it heard about it. Within twenty-four hours, as in 1962, spontaneous strikes had spread throughout Ontario, paralyzing the shipment of goods in Hamilton, Oshawa and Toronto. But after a couple of days, when the workers returned to work, they were met with a vicious campaign of reprisals that saw the firing of ten of their leaders and a demand by the employers that the Provincial Labour Department fine the Hamilton local \$2,000,000, and that two hundred members be prosecuted for taking strike action, all of which only succeeded in making the workers even more angry.

As in the 1962 strike, Local 938 in Toronto again became a centre of the rapidly growing opposition to the Hoffa machine. At an angry membership meeting following the wildcats, a motion of non-confidence in Ken McDougall was passed and his power to fire business agents was removed and the negotiating committee was re-organized to include two leaders of the wildcat strikes to provide it some backbone, one of them, Ken Thibideau, a leader of the Hamilton Local. When the augmented negotiating committee met with management, it demanded that all reprisals be dropped—otherwise negotiations would cease. But just as the next membership meeting was about to take place, on December 10th, and to save McDougall's bacon, Hoffa intervened to slap another trusteeship on the Local and keep McDougall and his cronies in power.

By then the FWD caucus had outlived its usefulness. According to George Bryant, after the defeat of the 1962 strike and under the difficult conditions of the trusteeship, it had become increasingly difficult for our people in the union to sustain. With its support declining and some of its supporters becoming increasingly undisciplined and unwilling to adhere to previously agreed to decisions, the LSA's George Bryant, Jimmy Howel and Harry Paine initiated its dissolution. In the new and rising mood of militancy at the end of 1965, they had reached out to new opposition forces in the other

four Locals in southern Ontario to help set up a new rank and file caucus that would provide leadership in the struggle for a new contract. A focal point for resistance to management became the "No Reprisals Defense Fund" that our LSA members had helped set up to defend and to financially support the fired strikers. We were also instrumental in producing the Teamsters Information Bulletin to publicize recommendations about a work-to-rule campaign and a proposal for refusal of overtime to pressure the bosses to come to an agreement. Our prestige had grown to such an extent that Harry Paine was elected Chairman of the union's all-powerful Strike Committee. For a short period, under the regime of the trusteeship, the strike committee in effect displaced the Executive Committee and took control of the Local. And similar to 1962, the rank and file caucus was again instrumental in persuading the membership to turn down the companies' offer.

Not wanting the ascendant opposition to get its bearings, the bosses went on the offensive. Taking advantage of the divisions in the union about the trusteeship issue and the absence of a structure to organize an effective resistance to them, they seized the moment to lock out over 21,000 workers. It turned out to be a long and grueling fourteen-week strike, with several of the Locals finally forced into submission and acceptance of the employers' proposals, with even the weary militant Local 938 voting for the rotten contract. And Hoffa again intervened to force an end, at the same time firing all those on staff who hadn't been sufficiently quick in responding to his demands.

Naturally, as an outgrowth of our activity in the Teamsters, many of the people with whom we had been collaborating began to participate more and more in the LSA's activities. That's how we got to know, of course, Jimmy Howel, who I have mentioned already, and his wife Mary, both of whom would later become important in the life of the Toronto branch and who, aside from his work in the Teamsters, helped us establish a summer camp, Camp Poundmaker, to carry out educational work. Jimmy had won wide respect among the Teamster rank and file not only because of his debating skills but also due to his fearlessness in physically confronting the goons the Teamster's brass would utilize to shutdown the militants' voices at monthly meetings. Alan Harris once told us of an occasion at the first mass meeting of the 1962 strike when he had finally been able to get himself recognized by the chair and that as he stood up to speak, several goons lunged at him to drag him to the floor but Jimmy jumped in to block their way, smashing one of them to the floor, with sharp blows to their heads and allowing Alan to finish his remarks. Driving transport in Toronto was a tough job in those days and violence was never far away. Fights would often break out on the city streets between drivers, sometimes with non-union operators over such things as parking and getting access to a building to deliver goods. Jimmy was well known for being very fast with his fists.

Quite a few Teamsters joined us at that time, sometimes even in groups of five, I remember, a startling number for a small group such as ours and we grew very quickly. In my estimation, very early on we had recruited around thirty-five or forty of them to the League for Socialist Action (LSA) which by that time had succeeded the SEL. But it turned out it was much easier to recruit them than to hold them. I'm sure it would have been very different if there had been a general rise in society of class consciousness among workers and while there had been an outburst of union militancy here and there, this was still not the case. Those were still politically conservative times and we were but a small organization. Despite our best efforts to hold on to the new recruits, the turnover was rapid. Many had joined the group with high expectations that we could not meet and obviously some of them had illusions about our real strength. Most were mature workers and had been in the workforce for considerable time, older than most of us, but attracted to our group, mainly because of our effectiveness in the union. They slowly drifted away, however. The burden of family commitments along with participation in the union and involvement in a political group just became too much for many of them. I remember one of them whom I had gotten to know very well. It was his first involvement in any kind of socialist activity, he told me over a beer. Married, in his forties and with a couple of children, he owned his own house, something unusual because most of us lived in

apartments or shared accommodations in those days. He was a driver for a long-haul trucking company and would often be away from Toronto for a couple of weeks at a time driving down to the American South and as far west as Vancouver. Shortly after he came into the group, I remember him one evening sitting next to me at a branch meeting. I was startled when he turned to me and enquired, in all seriousness, “Ernie, when are we going to get the guns and go for it?” He didn’t have the time to wait for revolution. He had to have it now. Not that he was “adventurist” or some kind of ultra leftist; he was only lacking in political understanding.

The Teamster experience was but one example of our always being on the lookout for a “breakthrough” in the class struggle where our ideas might be taken up by an important segment of the working class. I cite the foregoing, not to suggest there was a big radicalization taking place, but to show how we as a small revolutionary group functioned and what was possible if you got a break and were seriously organized. During the course of the fight in the Local, at one point we made a bloc with Ken McTaggart’s caucus—he had been a business agent who had found himself on Hoffa’s wrong side—getting him to agree to a very radical statement as a basis of unity, for winning a majority on the Executive Board of the Local but it wasn’t very long before he had broken that agreement and made his peace with Hoffa.

Our involvement in the Teamsters turned out to be an exceptional experience for us, but it happened not by any grand plan or design on our part, as I’ve mentioned, but rather because of our belief that the working class would eventually take the path to social revolution and our total commitment to its emancipation. We were only doing what comes naturally if you have such ideas. We had seen an opportunity to help a group of workers in their struggles with their employers and against the union bureaucracy and had grabbed it. It was primarily a trade union struggle and we were involved in it in one form or other well into the decade. If someone had stated then that “we needed a working class orientation,” as sometimes happens today when socialists talk amongst themselves, we would have been very puzzled because it would have been like telling a fish it should swim in water.

Ernest Tate

P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/3743>