

Labor (United States): Prospects for the Teamsters Under New Leadership

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The victory of the OZ slate in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) union, headed by Sean O'Brien and Fred Zuckerman and backed by Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), has raised the question: Will this new leadership bring about reform in one of the nation's largest and most powerful unions? Real reform would mean a union that is free from corruption, more democratic, willing to mobilize the members to fight the bosses, and capable of also addressing broader social issues like Trumpism, COVID, and climate change.

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To put it another way: Is the Teamsters a powerful union? Is it now headed by reformers who will take on United Parcel Service (UPS) in the 2023 contract? Can the Teamsters win a UPS strike and then go on to launch a major organizing drive among Amazon workers to bring them into the labor movement? Will the Teamsters become just a more militant business union, or will it be able to begin to challenge the economic and political powers that be? If the union is reformed and becomes an organization that mobilizes its members to fight for themselves, its example could have an enormous impact on the entire American labor movement. It could encourage resistance to the employers, it could legitimate class struggle, and it could provide an alternative to the left's current emphasis on electoral politics.

The Teamsters has been at a juncture like this before, back in the 1990s when Ron Carey, supported by TDU, became Teamster president. A comparison between the cases of Carey and O'Brien and, more broadly, between the Carey-TDU and the O'Brien-TDU relationships could be illuminating. So, we turn here to look at the Teamsters union and reform slates in historical perspective in order to understand where the union may be heading.



Is the Teamsters a Powerful Union?

The Teamsters have the reputation of being a particularly powerful union, and it certainly was from the 1930s until the 1970s. During the 1930s, successful strikes and organizing drives, particularly in Minneapolis, but also in Boston, Chicago, and Seattle, transformed the Teamsters from a small, exclusive craft union into a large, inclusive quasi-industrial union. The most important of these was the Minneapolis experience where Farrell Dobbs and other revolutionary socialists led a series of wild cat strikes and then an extensive organizing drive in the Upper Midwest. Working with Dobbs at the time was a young Teamster organizer from Detroit, Jimmy Hoffa, who, while he didn't agree with Dobbs' politics, adopted his organizing strategies.

At about the same time, in 1935, the US Congress passed the Motor Carrier Act that established government regulation of the trucking industry, establishing routes, rates, and controlling entry into the industry. The act ended cut-throat competition and stabilized the industry, since new trucking companies could no longer enter the industry and undercut shipping rates, while established companies were guaranteed the going rate so the employers had less motivation to cut wages.

The combination of the transformation of the Teamsters from a craft union into a semi-industrial union, the passage of the Motor Carrier Act that stabilized the industry, and the building of the Interstate Highway System beginning in 1956, together with the post-war prosperity of the American economy, created a new reality for motor freight workers. During this period, the first national trucking companies became established: Pacific Intermountain Express, Consolidated Freightways, Roadway, Yellow Freight, and others, meaning that a piece of freight could now be moved from coast to coast by one company. The motor freight industry became big business.

When Jimmy Hoffa became the president of the union in 1957, he began the process of unifying many regional and local contracts into the National Master Freight Agreement (NMFA) that was first negotiated in January of 1964. The agreement covered more than 450,000 long-haul and local cartage drivers and dockworkers across the country. In those years, Teamsters not only won higher wages, but also employer contributions to their pension and health funds. It was the Teamsters domination of the freight industry that made it a truly powerful union.

Throughout the period from the 1930s to the 1970s, the Teamsters union grew through official strikes, wildcat strikes, and job actions, by means of which it won contracts and defended them. Those experiences not only won higher wages but also created a sense of cohesion and solidarity among warehousemen, dockworkers, and truck drivers, particularly among the drivers, nearly all of whom were white men. In those years, the companies generally did not hire black over-the-road drivers as white over-the-road drivers in the South and other areas refused to work with Black drivers. Women were not hired for freight jobs. Only with the settlement of a US government suit against trucking employers and the union did Black and Latino workers gain some acceptances among the drivers. Blacks and Latinos did work on the docks.

Within the union, the big-city freight locals - Boston, New York, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Atlanta, Seattle, and Los Angeles, and a few others - held the dominant political power in the union. Those truckdrivers were at the center of American industry, connecting many small companies with the giants of the economy in steel, auto, glass, rubber, electrical, appliances, plastics, garments, you name it. Trucks carried everything, and Teamsters drove those trucks, giving them the power to paralyze the economy and also the power to support other workers on strike by refusing to cross their picket lines.

I remember as a truck driver in Chicago in the 1970s that on several occasions when I arrived to make a delivery to a factory on strike there would be pickets at the gate. I would call the dispatcher

and tell him that I could not make the delivery because of the strike, explaining that if I attempted to cross the picket line, the company's truck and the customers' freight on board might be damaged. They didn't care if I was injured, but they did care about their equipment. In truth, sometimes there were just a few people picketing or maybe even just one. Other drivers did the same thing. The dispatchers always said, "Forget it. Go to your next stop" because it was not worth getting into a fight with the Teamsters union. The Teamsters' power at that time was feared by the bosses and recognized and appreciated by other unions and workers.

The Teamsters union then was comparable to the United Mine Workers in the coal industry, to the United Steel Workers in basic steel-making, to the United Auto Workers in the auto industry, and to other industrial unions, that is, the IBT absolutely dominated the freight industry and related industries such as car hauling, and package delivery (for UPS), and it also organized other drivers in beverage delivery (beer and soda pop), construction (rock, sand, and gravel), and waste, among others. The domination of the freight industry with its 450,000 workers gave the Teamsters the ability to organize others in related industries, like agricultural packing sheds, dairy, baking, and groceries, and it also made it possible to bring some completely unrelated factories into the union, so that by the 1970s, the IBT had a membership of two million, the biggest union in the US at the time. It really was a powerful union then, though on the brink of decline.

From Power to Weakness: Corruption and Deregulation

The power of the Teamsters union eroded for three reasons, one having to do with the leadership, the second with the deregulation of the industry, and the third with broader changes in the economy. While Jimmy Hoffa was centralizing and expanding the power of the Teamsters, he also permitted, and even encouraged, the Mafia to play an important role in the union. Mafiosi like Tony Provenzano, head of the New Jersey Teamsters, were important allies of Hoffa. An associate of the Chicago mob, Hoffa's friend Allen Dorfman played a key role in the Central States Pension Fund. There were dozens of other Mafiosi as well. The United States Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities in Labor and Management (also known as the McClellan Committee or Labor Racketeering Committee) began investigations into the Teamsters, with Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) serving as chief counsel. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy made his brother the US Attorney General, and RFK, motivated by a concern to eliminate the Mafia from American society, but perhaps also by a desire to weaken the Teamsters as a union, pursued Hoffa relentlessly.

Hoffa was eventually convicted of bribery and fraud and sentenced to thirteen years in prison. His hand-picked successor Frank Fitzsimmons subsequently arranged a deal with President Richard Nixon to allow Hoffa to leave prison in 1971, but on the condition that he not participate in union activities until 1980. With Hoffa effectively banned from the union and unable to reclaim his role as its leader, Fitzsimmons remained the union president. Since Nixon had helped him, he, in turn, supported Nixon and the Republican Party. The men played golf together, which says it all.

Once out of prison after serving just a few years, Hoffa began to fight to get back his old position. He attempted to rally rank-and-file members with class struggle rhetoric, but he also threatened to blow the whistle on the mobsters in the union. The Mafia took his threats seriously, which is why in July of 1975, Hoffa disappeared, most probably kidnapped and murdered by the mob.

At just about that time, a group of leftists became involved in the union, members of the US based International Socialists (IS, which eventually evolved into Solidarity) joined with longtime union activists and reformers to launch a national campaign called Teamsters for a Decent Contract in 1975. The campaign, which ignited some local wildcat strikes in freight and at UPS, was successful

in forcing the union to call a national strike, which led to higher wages and other improvements. Those involved in that campaign then founded Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), and Ken Paff, the leading strategist of the movement, became national organizer, a post he held for over forty years. TDU fought for union reforms such as elected stewards, engaged in shop-floor organizing, and pushed for more militant union action, while also running candidates for positions in the Teamsters national leadership. TDU did so consistently and tirelessly in an increasingly corrupt union environment and amidst the beginning of the neoliberal transformation of the economy through deregulation.

As president, Fitzsimmons adopted a policy of letting regional leaders - including Mafia leaders - run their own pieces of the union, so the union that had been centralized under Hoffa became a loose federation of baronies under Fitz. Thus began the political and administrative disintegration of the union as Teamster leaders like Provenzano in New Jersey, Jackie Presser in Cleveland, Roy Williams in Kansas City, and others in various regions began to negotiate substandard contracts and to exchange 'labor peace' for employer bribes. Business unionism gave way to gangster unionism in several areas. When lung cancer kept Fitzsimmons from running for another term as president, he was succeeded by Roy Williams in 1981 who, in turn, was followed by Jackie Presser in 1983. The greed of the leadership advanced even further with Williams taking home as much as \$813,247 a year and Presser \$550,000 for the various posts they held. As was later learned, both Williams and Presser were involved with the Mafia and simultaneously acting as FBI informants. Throughout that period, they and other Teamster leaders used undemocratic procedures, intimidation, and violence to pressure the members to vote for bad contracts, while at the same time, they cultivated privileged followers among selected groups of drivers and dockworkers of some freight locals.

While the Mafia and corruption played a role, it was the deregulation of the freight industry that ultimately - and severely - weakened the Teamsters. The Motor Carrier Act of 1980, promoted by reformers such as Ralph Nader and Democratic Party politicians such as Senator Ted Kennedy and President Jimmy Carter, allowed new entrants into the trucking industry and permitted companies to set their own routes and rates. The result was that within ten years the number of trucking companies had doubled from 20,000 to 40,000 as new non-union companies entered the industry, paying their employees far less than Teamster wages and benefits. The then existing unionized national companies, such as Consolidated Freightways, still ran their shrinking unionized operations but also opened new non-union affiliates, a practice known as 'double breasting'. Many brand-new, non-union companies set up terminals and operations, while non-union trucking brokers also provided drivers, and increasing numbers of non-union owner-operators came into the field. Competitive chaos was accompanied by folding companies and mass job loss.

The saddest part of the story is that in several instances, in an attempt to save their jobs, workers set up Employee Stock Ownership Plans (or ESOPs), using their pension money to buy the failing companies for which they worked. They hired corporate business managers to run them, but even though they exploited themselves mercilessly, they could not save their companies and their jobs in the face of the non-union competition. They ended up losing both jobs and pensions.

As a result, while the Teamsters once represented about 450,000 freight workers, now they represent little more than 75,000 at the few surviving unionized national companies. Today, somewhere between 750,000 to one million non-union, owner-operator, over-the-road drivers move most of the motor freight across the nation. The heart of the Teamsters union, its strongest group of workers who were also its most active members, was almost completely destroyed by deregulation. With that, the political center of the union shifted from freight to package handling and logistics, that is, to UPS, the largest package company, but also the most important logistics operation which employs some 320,000 Teamster members.

A third factor that led to the weakening of the union was the economic recessions of 1973-75 and of 1980-82, the latter seeing unemployment rates near 10 percent, the highest since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Facing that situation, workers became reluctant to strike for fear of losing their jobs to scabs, now called 'replacement workers'. In the Teamsters, workers who, throughout the period from the 1930s to the early 1980s, had engaged in all sorts of job actions, wildcat strikes, and official strikes now became reluctant to take such action. While news commentators often say, 'strikes hurt everyone', it is not true. Strikes reinvigorate unions, remind workers of their power, give them practice in exercising that power, teach the lessons about the balance of power whether they win or lose. And when they win, strikes can also improve workers' lives on the job and increase their standard of living. Union leaders, including the Teamsters, uninterested in but no longer knowing how to lead strikes, made terrible concessions in wages, health care coverage, multi-tier contracts, and contracting-out. With the 1980s, the strike era that had given birth to reform movements such as TDU ended. The unions declined in strength and numbers; their members, with no experience of struggle, often no longer knew how to take action for themselves.

From the 1980s until today, the Teamsters has ceased to be a powerful industrial union. None of its leaders had a plan to recoup its hold on the freight industry, so the Teamsters ceased to be a semi-industrial union and became what we can call a general union. At the same time, the union largely failed to fight for those remaining freight and package workers, and instead negotiated contracts that allowed two or more tiers, part-time work, contracting-out, and inadequate wages and benefits. Teamster officials, however, anxious to maintain the union's dues base, that is, the income that provided for the top officials' extravagant salaries - some as high as \$500,000 a year - and golden parachute pensions, adopted a strategy of organizing anybody, anywhere, in any industry. The Teamsters, now a general union, competed with other established unions to organize city and state public employees, teachers, police officers and fire fighters, prison guards, health and hospital workers, high-tech workers, and well, you name it. They also sometimes raided other unions to steal members way from them. Anything to get more members and more dues.

Most of these workers had nothing in common with truck drivers, dockworkers, and warehousemen and often had little in common with each other. This policy of competition with other unions in order to organize all sorts of workers not only failed to build the power of the Teamsters in its historic center, which was freight, or its new center, package delivery, but it also weakened other unions that were attempting to organize other industries such as education or health care, since workers in those industries now became divided among different rival unions. Many of these new Teamster members had little sense of identification with the union nationally, and the union failed to establish a new identity as a union of all workers, which perhaps helps to explain why only about 15 percent of members voted in the most recent national elections for top officers. Many, and perhaps most, rank and file Teamsters clearly feel completely alienated from their union.

So, as the OZ slate and the coalition known as Teamsters United prepares to take power, it is inheriting a union that has been largely hollowed out, a union whose now highly diverse workforce in many industries does not share a strong identification with the organization or a sense of solidarity with each other, an outfit where 85 percent of the members did not feel strongly motivated enough to find a post office box and put their mail ballot envelope in it in order to cast a vote for the election of their own leaders. There are still some stronger, more highly motivated divisions, like UPS and car haul, but strengthening the Teamsters and making it powerful again will be a very big job.

The Experience of Ron Carey and TDU

The O'Brien-Zuckerman (OZ) team, supported by TDU, is not the first experiment in union reform since the union's heyday. In the 1990s, Ron Carey, also backed by TDU, became the IBT president and similarly tested the possibilities of reform and militancy. It is an experience well worth analyzing.

Carey was raised in an Irish Catholic family in Queens, went to a good high school, set aside college to serve in the US Marines, and then, following his dad's career, got a job at UPS. Smart and ambitious, he became a union steward and in 1967 was elected president of Teamster Local 804 representing UPS workers in New York. He took several college courses in labor studies to better prepare himself for the job. Carey was a registered Republican who held conservative views on various issues, including being an anti-Communist, but he was a militant business unionist, an honest union official, and a fighter. He led the local through several strikes, winning for his members some of the best wages and conditions in the country, which is why he was reelected local president eight times. Naturally the venal, corrupt, sell-out national presidents of the union from Fitzsimons to Presser, from Roy Williams to William J. McCarthy, detested Carey and worked to isolate him. So, during the 1980s, Carey collaborated with TDU on organizing UPS workers to win better contracts. A mutually beneficial relationship developed between the New York UPS leader and the national reform caucus.

In 1989, the US government - in yet another attempt to end Mafia involvement in the union - brought a Racketeer Influenced Corrupt Organization (RICO) lawsuit against the Teamsters union. The Justice Department contemplated a complete takeover of the union, but Teamsters for a Democratic Union intervened in the suit, asking the government to grant the Teamster members the right to vote as individuals for the top leaders of the union. Until then, union officers had been elected at conventions dominated by corrupt union officials and staff. The government accepted TDU's suggestion, leading to the possibility of a far more democratic union. The RICO suit led to thirty-years of government oversight of the union and the removal in the first several years of about 200 corrupt officials, many of them mobsters.

When Carey ran for president in a campaign that lasted from 1989 to 1991, it was the first election conducted under the new rules that gave members the right to vote. Carey worked closely with TDU, a relationship based on the recognition that TDU needed a reform candidate for the presidency of the union and Carey needed the national network that TDU had constructed over the previous 15 years. One could not call the campaign a honeymoon, however, because when campaigning, often the first words out of Carey's mouth at a local rally were, 'I am not TDU.' Perhaps this was to protect himself from red-baiting (since the role of socialists in the founding of TDU had become well-known), but as Carey's former organizing director Bob Muehlenkamp told me, "Carey did not want the perception that TDU controlled him."

Carey won the election with a plurality, 48 percent of the vote as the old guard supporters were divided between two other candidates. When Carey took office, he did so with 15 reformers on the 18-member executive board members, about half of whom were TDU activists. Carey immediately sold off the fleet of Teamsters private planes, cut his own salary from \$225,000 to \$175,000, and began the onerous, personally dangerous, and politically hazardous task of working with the US government's appointed trustees to remove the Mafia from the union.

Given TDU's support, Ken Paff had expected Carey to hire him for some top office, like chief of staff or organizing director, and to bring other TDU members to work for the union's national staff as well. Paff called me at the time and told me to be ready to go to Washington. But the call never

came, for him or me. As Muehlenkamp explained, Carey did not trust TDU and he believed that many of the newly elected TDU executive board members did not have the union experience in organizing, leading and settling strikes, or negotiating contracts. So rather than hiring them as top staffers, Carey hired a crew of experienced, progressive labor staffers from outside the Teamsters, several of whom were friends of TDU. But the new president wanted to keep TDU at a distance, only later hiring some TDUers, and then mostly for second-tier staff jobs.

In fact, Carey almost immediately began the process of pushing TDU away. In one of the first executive board meetings, he told the TDU members, each of whom had been elected by union members, "TDU is not your boss. I'm your boss." TDU members were expected to be Carey yes-men.

Carey, now isolated among the union officialdom nationally, most of whom were holdovers from the old order, and with no political confidence in TDU on his political left, came to the conclusion that he needed to broaden his base of support among the union's local officials. He decided that he would do so by holding out an olive branch to the old guard and attempt to work with some of them. At that time, according a former TDU activist, TDU's leadership discouraged some of its own members from running for office and supported slates made up of TDU members and others who were not reformers. As a result, some TDU members were, "emotionally and politically broken and sidelined." Most TDU members and other rank-and-filers remained in the dark about these developments.

Despite his attempt to build an alliance with old-guard officials, Cary was losing support. Some of those officials, Muehlenkamp told me, engaged in strikes but then artificially prolonged them while members drew strike pay in an attempt to bankrupt the union treasury and thus damage Carey. The union had also lost some 500,000 dues-paying members since 1979 as a result of deregulation. So, Carey pushed for a 25-percent dues increase in early 1994 to replenish the union's treasury. But the dues increase was defeated by a membership vote of 3 to 1, a stinging blow for Carey. Two years later, at the Teamsters convention in July 1996, Jimmy Hoffa, Jr. was able to muster more convention votes than Carey, another significant sign of the reform president's weakness.

One has the impression that while he had been an excellent local union leader, as a national leader facing aggressive employers, the Mafia, and the US government, Carey often felt out of his depth. Muehlenkamp said that Carey maintained an office at Local 804, where he had formerly been president, just to get away from headquarters. "Being around his old local's members recharged his batteries," said Muehlenkamp.

Whatever the tensions between Carey and TDU, the collaboration continued and made it possible in 1997 for the union to conduct a remarkably successful national strike against UPS that paralyzed the company, inspired millions of Teamsters and other workers, and created new opportunities for the workers movement. That UPS strike remains a model of strike strategy, organization, and tactics. The IBT staff and TDU activists first conducted surveys among the members, organized discussions of their demands, and in that way, built momentum for a strike. Carey had not initially wanted a strike, but the pressure from the base had built up among the members, and it became unavoidable. At one point, he turned to one of the organizers and said, "Well, I guess you've got your fuckin' strike."

The Carey-TDU collaboration was essential to the strike's victory. Carey's administration established the central theme of the strike as the demand for full-time jobs for all workers with a brilliant slogan: 'Part-Time America Doesn't Work.' The idea that workers wanted and needed full-time jobs not only resonated with the UPS employees but also with most of the American people. Finally, the union presented its case to the public with impressive video advertisements in which the UPS workers themselves - young, smiling, and well-spoken - just like those who came to the door each day with your packages, explained why they were striking. Public support was overwhelming. Carey did not

have support from all UPS local leaders, but in locals where officials refused to support the national campaign, TDU activists stepped up, worked with Teamster headquarters, and organized the strike.

The AFL-CIO's president, John Sweeney, a reformer who Carey had helped to elect, supported the Teamster strike, which was a great asset. The strike was also tremendously successful in part because UPS package handlers and drivers had been trained to do their jobs in a particularly efficient way that made it impossible to hire replacements for them off the street. The union won the strike, giving Carey the momentum, he needed to win re-election as Teamster president.

"It was a signal victory in the labor movement," said Ken Paff. "It was a decisive victory converting many thousands of low-paid, part-time jobs to union wage full-time jobs. At the time [AFL-CIO President] John Sweeney said that the strike had done more for organizing than any millions of dollars the unions spent on gaining members."

In 1996 (simultaneous with organizing the UPS strike), Carey launched his campaign for a second term as union president. He pushed aside TDU, which had largely managed his first campaign, and hired operatives with background in the United Mineworkers Union (UMW), in NGOs, and in the Democratic Party to run his second campaign. TDU still worked on the Carey campaign, though largely independent of the new managers. Carey won the 1996 election, defeating Jimmy Hoffa, Jr. by 52 to 48 percent, but as it turned out, he won through fraud. It was discovered that the operatives he had brought in from outside to manage the campaign had arranged a complicated scheme to use hundreds of thousands of dollars of the union's money to re-elect him. Named as accomplices in the scheme were other major union officials, such as Richard Trumka, a former reform leader of the UMW and secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO, and Gerald McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Carey had turned to the labor bureaucracy rather than to the rank and file, and the results were disastrous.

When the corruption scheme was revealed, a federal judge ordered the Teamsters to rerun the election, but the court-appointed overseer disqualified Carey from seeking office. Then the Independent Review Board which had been set up by the RICO settlement found that Carey had "closed his eyes" to the corruption taking place so the Board went further, expelling him from the union. That he was persecuted by the federal judges and overseers there is no doubt. Carey was eventually tried and cleared of all charges. Clearly, UPS wanted to rid itself of Carey and find a more friendly union leader, the old guard wanted to return to the corrupt glory days, and some elements within the US government wanted to break the power of the union. Yet, though he was no doubt persecuted, it is also true that Carey had invited in the group who ran his campaign (in the same manner as such campaigns other unions were also sometimes run) and that the fraud had happened on his watch. One might conclude that if Carey did not know, it was because he didn't want to know.

With Carey disqualified and then expelled from the union, Tom Leedham, a highly respected TDU ally, stepped into the breach as the reform candidate. However, with Carey and the reform forces discredited, Jimmy Hoffa, Jr. defeated Leedham 54.5 percent to 39.3 percent (with 28 percent of members voting). The Carey election fiasco was also a debacle for TDU, which had been so closely associated with him, and therefore, a setback for the union reform movement too. Hoffa Jr.'s ascension to the presidency meant that the UPS contract that had promised full-time jobs and other improvements was not fulfilled, much of Carey's reform work was undone, and a new era of union collaboration with the employers and neglect of the members had begun. It would last almost twenty-five years.

In retrospect, it seems clear that Ron Carey's conception of union reform was limited by his commitment to business unionism. He believed that he could harness the forces from below to reform the union from above. He believed that the union, if it were free of the Mafia, could, by

engaging in the usual process of contract negotiation accompanied by militant strikes, if necessary, win a decent life for everybody. He also believed that his best allies were in the union bureaucracy – like the Mine Workers Union staff who worked on his second campaign – rather than with his own union’s rank and file. Carey’s 1950s and 60s view of things, a vision based on the long stretch of prosperity of an earlier era, left him unarmed in the face of the capitalist system with its crises, new technologies, transformations of industry, new economic policies, and shifting political power. Carey embodied the limits of union reform within the system.

What Will Happen with O’Brien?

The newly elected leadership, led by President Sean O’Brien, will take power in the union in March 2022. The leadership team of Teamsters United is a coalition involving Sean O’Brien and Fred Zuckerman, former rivals who came out of the Jimmy Hoffa, Jr. administration at different moments, and then both of them later allied with Teamsters for a Democratic Union. Zuckerman broke with Hoffa, Jr. some time ago and ran against him for Teamster president in 2016 with TDU’s backing, while O’Brien only broke with Hoffa in 2018. At times, the two men who headed the OZ slate had both been strongly criticized by TDU, and TDU likewise had criticized both of them. But in 2021, they all joined together to defeat Steve Vairma, another Hoffa administration figure. What can be expected when such a coalition comes to power?



Throughout the past forty-five years, TDU organized workers both in the workplace and local unions, and supported national candidates for leadership. It did so during a long period of working-class quiescence, as all unions lost members, and strikes became rare. TDU’s national organizer and staff worked long hours at low wages to keep the organization afloat. TDU’s membership, never very large, a few thousand at most, fluctuated, local chapters came and went, yet TDU continued to organize, creating new chapters and recruiting new members, strongest among UPS workers, so that from time to time, it was able to help to elect local reform slates. During the quiet years, TDU found clusters of new fighters in different areas whose presence made the movement a little more diverse ethnically and culturally. TDU did an excellent job in training workers in grievance handling, contract campaigns, running local elections, but as an organization, it did not attempt to discuss the issue facing the labor movement more broadly – leaving that to Labor Notes – and it seldom took up social issues or national politics.

In those years, TDU’s determined leader, Ken Paff, continued to look for the possibility of bringing change to the Teamsters. The opportunity arose out of the 2018 UPS contract negotiations. In challenging Hoffa, Jr. on that UPS contract, TDU was allied with Fred Zuckerman, head of Local 89 in Louisville, Kentucky, who, backed by TDU, had run for Teamster president against Hoffa, Jr. in 2016, narrowly losing by about 6,600 votes. As the campaign advanced, Sean O’Brien, head of Boston Local 25 and leader of UPS negotiations, suggested adding Zuckerman to the bargaining team, leading Hoffa, Jr. to take the UPS negotiations away from O’Brien. O’Brien then became a major figure in the campaign to ‘vote no’ on the contract.

A majority of UPS workers – 54 percent – eventually voted against the contract, but under the

Teamster rules then in place, it took two-thirds to reject the contract (only 44 percent of eligible members participated in the ratification referendum). Against the majority, Hoffa, Jr. imposed the unpopular contract. Following those events, Zuckerman and O'Brien joined together and decided to run for the top offices in the union. TDU then had to make a decision about what it would do. TDU's national organizer Ken Paff overcame some resistance and convinced the TDU leadership and the organization as a whole to embrace the OZ slate, arguing that the long sought-after change would now be possible with the combination of 'reform from above and from below'.

How does the OZ slate and its Teamsters United coalition compare with the Carey-TDU alliance? The latter had a relationship of collaboration built on several years of common work on UPS contracts. They had shared goals - despite greater tensions after Carey's election - that made it possible for them to work together as partners, most importantly on the UPS contract. Sean O'Brien's relationship with TDU, at least initially, was altogether different. O'Brien actually threatened to punish TDU-backed union reformers in Teamster Local 251 in Providence, Rhode Island, who ran a reform slate against an incumbent favored by O'Brien. O'Brien's threat of violence led the RICO-created Independent Review Board to impose on O'Brien a disciplinary action and a 14-day suspension from all union positions. Beyond that, O'Brien has a thuggish reputation, and his followers in his Boston local, who sometimes use racist and misogynistic language on union picket lines, clearly don't all share TDU's democratic and egalitarian values.

Yet, when O'Brien spoke at TDU convention in October 2021, he told the assembly, "Our coalition with TDU, Teamsters United, and anyone else who wants to take on the fight against employers will last well beyond this election." O'Brien has repeatedly said that TDU is an integral part of the coalition. Already before his campaign he had mended relations with Local 251 in Providence, and one of its officers, Matt Taibi, was chosen for O'Brien's executive board slate and became Eastern Regional Vice-President.

TDU and its members were energized by their recent work on the Teamsters United campaign, and they look forward to making the union both more democratic and more militant. O'Brien has taken power with a new executive board that includes some genuine reforms, including a couple of TDU members. While TDU played a role in the new president's victory, it is not clear that it will have a much influence. TDU has raised important issues, such as the reorganization of the union's industrial divisions, the continuing fight for elected stewards, and preparation for strikes in car haul and at UPS. Will O'Brien take up all of these? Will O'Brien integrate TDU members into his administration? Will he hire TDU members to work on the IBT national staff? Now that it is allied with O'Brien, will TDU be able to continue to play its independent role, or will TDU board members and union staff be expected to simply say yes? All of these questions are on the table.

First, will this be an administration of reform? While Zuckerman and O'Brien rebelled against the Hoffa, Jr. administration, and especially against its failure to fight UPS, still, both of them and others on the slate come out of that regime, and it remains to be seen if they will be able to break with old relationships and practices. Hoffa, Jr.'s leadership was characterized by a go-along, get-along relationship with the employers, seeking accommodation rather than challenging the bosses. Hoffa, Jr. and other Teamster leaders failed to fight for higher wages, accepted two-tier contracts, acquiesced on pension cuts, and, in general, oversaw the deterioration of union agreements. Throughout the Hoffa Jr. years, top officers continued to be paid extravagant salaries, more than ten making over \$300,000 a year and two making more than \$400,000, while even the highest paid workers in the Teamsters union rarely make \$100,000 a year, some earn \$80,00, and many make far less. O'Brien himself makes over \$190,000 and Fred Zuckerman \$150,000. TDU's Rank-and-File Bill of Rights stated, "No officer should make more than the highest paid working members in his jurisdiction." But that Bill of Rights was rescinded at TDU's most recent convention, reportedly to be revised and updated.

Still, it does seem that things are changing. At the Teamsters union convention held last summer, the delegates representing the coalition - O'Brien, Zuckerman, and TDU - held about half the votes and won three important reforms. Delegates voted for majority rule on the contract, ending the rule that had required two-thirds to vote a contract down. They also voted into the constitution a new article stating that every bargaining committee must now include rank-and-file members. Finally, the convention passed a resolution that strike benefits will be distributed from day one of a strike, not at the eighth day, as previously. These are significant, meaningful changes that give the ranks more power in their union and vis-à-vis the employers.

A Winning UPS Strike in 2023?

Fred Zuckerman in 2016 and Sean O'Brien in 2021 both argued that under Hoffa the Teamsters had failed to take on UPS and that it was absolutely necessary to do so. TDU agrees with both of them on that. The question is, then, will the O'Brien administration be able to challenge the union's single biggest employer, organize a strike, and win meaningful gains for its members in the 2023 contract?



Will O'Brien and his team be able to organize such a national strike, as Carey did with the aid of TDU? Will the OZ team have the ability to develop a strategy and the administrative capacity to put it into effect? O'Brien has both a reputation as a fighter against UPS and experience in leadership positions, not only as the leader of Local 25, but also as leader of the New England Joint Council of Teamsters, head of the Package Division, and chief negotiator of the UPS contract in 2017. (Remember that Hoffa, Jr. removed him from that last position after O'Brien announced that he wanted to put Fred Zuckerman of the Louisville local on the team. It was that which led to O'Brien's break from Hoffa and his alliance with Zuckerman.) While O'Brien has held important positions, he has not led a large regional or national strike against a powerful multi-billion-dollar corporation. Leading a fight against UPS will put him to the test. O'Brien, who comes out of the old regime and has many contacts among union officials, may feel he can rely on the local union leaders and doesn't need a group like TDU to organize and win.

UPS workers want to see improvements in the contract in several areas. Today UPS has a multiple-tier contract with wage differentials between full- and part-time workers. There is also the issue of what are called '22.4' workers who represent a low-wage tier (\$6.00 an hour less). The historic demand for full-time jobs may have to be taken up again together with other demands to increase wages for part-timers and to eliminate the 22.4 tier. In any case, workers will be demanding more pay and better conditions. How hard will UPS resist the union's demands? Will the corporation be willing to make concessions in order to get on with business, and would O'Brien be willing to accept what they offer, for example, if they eliminated tiers, claiming victory but avoiding a strike? Perhaps.

To answer the question about UPS, we have to look at the package delivery business and the changing relationship between UPS and Amazon.

The Teamsters have historically been in a good position to deal with UPS because it has been represented by the union for decades and has had few domestic competitors, though the union's failure to organize FedEx and FedEx Ground is a weakness. Like freight, the package delivery companies are unregulated, which means that new companies offering lower rates can enter into competition with the established outfits. Amazon is about to do just that.

The relationship between UPS and Amazon reminds one of that between the United States and China. For a long time they were economic partners but have now become competitors, and war could be on the horizon.

Amazon began as retailer of books but soon became a general online retail service advertising the products of many companies and selling them online to consumers. Products bought through Amazon were delivered to customer by the US Postal Service (USPS), by FedEx, or by UPS. Now, however, Amazon has surpassed both UPS and FedEx in package delivery. Amazon reportedly has "400,000 drivers worldwide, 40,000 semi-trucks, 30,000 vans, and a fleet of more than 70 planes" (CNBC). Amazon's air service both carries the products it sells online and now handles freight or packages for third parties as well. Amazon began its package car fleet with 20,000 diesel Sprinter vans from Mercedes-Benz, but the company has recently ordered 100,000 electric-powered vans from Rivian to be delivered by 2030. It is also buying thousands of electric Ram vans from Stellantis (formed after merger of Fiat Chrysler and Peugeot), 1,800 electric vans from Daimler, and 10,000 three-wheeled vehicles from Mahindra, an Indian company. This is a lot of equipment capable of delivering a lot of packages.

Amazon has since its founding worked systematically and successfully to prevent the organization of unions among its employees in the United States. Over the last several years, there have been various efforts to organize Amazon workers by labor unions, labor-community coalitions, and by some leftist groups - but though there have been some protests, small walkouts, and petitions for union election, it remains an open shop. All of this makes Amazon a very serious competitor of UPS, FedEx, and the USPS. The big brown machine' of UPS now faces Amazon's big blue machine, which means UPS will have to fight harder to keep down labor costs. This could make UPS take a harder stance in a future strike. And a strike at UPS may not be as effective as it once was if shippers and consumers can turn to Amazon. If O'Brien does lead a strike against UPS, it may be more challenging than ever.

If O'Brien and the Teamster United election does 'open the door' to rank-and-file action, as Paff puts it, that could lead to a real workers' movement that could change the Teamsters and affect the labor movement as a whole. The door must be opened, and the rank and file must be prepared to take advantage of the opening. If it does we could see a new era for labor with increasing class struggle and class consciousness, with militant minorities sparking mass labor movements. We could see a new day for the labor left.

The Teamsters New Leadership in the Labor Movement and Politics

We should say a few words about the Teamsters union leadership in the labor movement and in politics in the near future. The Teamsters were expelled in 1957 from the AFL-CIO, the umbrella organization to which most US unions belong, because of its corruption and refusal to cooperate with Congressional committees investigating the union. Thirty years later, in 1987, when Jackie Presser, the Mafia-FBI double agent was president, the Teamsters rejoined the AFL-CIO. When Ron Carey took over leadership of the Teamsters, he led the union to support the election of John Sweeney, a progressive labor leader who attempted to reform the federation. Some of Sweeney's

former supporters, however, leaders of several of the largest unions, broke from the old federation in 2005 to form the Strategic Organizing Center, better known as Change to Win, a coalition of several other large unions and their 5.5 million members. Hoffa, Jr. took the Teamsters into Change to Win, but it failed to bring about much change nor did it win much.

O'Brien says he is willing to consider once again rejoining the AFL-CIO but has not yet made a decision about it. Advocates argue that rejoining the AFL-CIO would give the labor movement a lot more power but, in truth, the federation is a not a very progressive or aggressive body, has no power over its affiliates, and channels much of its energy into support for the Democratic Party, which for decades has little for the working class. It's a checkered history at best, but if the Teamsters become a genuine center for reform and militancy and set the ranks in motion, then rejoining the AFL-CIO might have a salutary effect on labor as a whole.

Related to the question of the AFL-CIO is the issue of the Democratic Party. The Teamsters were like almost all other unions, historically aligned with the Democratic Party until Robert Kennedy's pursuit of Jimmy Hoffa in the 1960s. Under Fitzsimmons, the Teamster leadership aligned with the Republican Party, though later, under Hoffa, Jr., it returned to the Democratic Party fold. Meanwhile, however, many white working-class Democrats, both men and women, deserted the party and began to vote for Republicans and subsequently a good many of those became supporters or former president Donald Trump. When Hoffa and other Teamster leaders proclaimed their support for Joseph Biden as candidate for president, they knew many of their members would ignore them and vote for Trump.

In terms of political values and program, perhaps Bernie Sanders represented the best practical alternative within the Democratic Party for Teamsters and other working-class people. Since the Sanders' campaigns, however, the progressive wing of the Democratic Party has not had much success. Progressive Democrats like Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez and 'the Squad' have with few exceptions largely been kept in line behind Biden and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Sean O'Brien has been meeting with Biden's Secretary of Labor Martin Walsh, former mayor of O'Brien's hometown Boston. O'Brien has praised Biden's pro-labor positions, such as the proposed Protecting the Right to Organize Act, which now appears to have little or no chance of passing, and he is clearly trying to put himself in the good graces of the Biden White House. If the Teamsters were at some time in the future to become a militant, progressive union, it might give them some sway in pushing the Democrats to the left and, if that failed, the Teamsters could, in theory, become a pole for independent political action to the left of the Democrats. The idea of a labor party, a workers' party, might be put on the agenda. But the prospect of any such independent working-class political action, much less a labor party, is not on the agenda for the foreseeable future.

The New Teamsters in the Brave New World

Sean O'Brien and his team will take power in March in what, following the novelist Aldous Huxley, we might call a Brave New World, one that is an emerging dystopia made up of the environmental disaster of climate change, recurring pandemics of deadly viruses, a staggering world economy, and a rightward political shift involving conspiracy theories and growing authoritarianism. With all of this has come mass migration by millions around the world. The head of one of US's largest and potentially most powerful unions will have to provide leadership not only on workers' issues in the narrow sense but also on social and political issues that the union, the working class, and the entire country faces. Will the O'Brien administration be up to it?

Let's take the question of conspiracy theories and authoritarianism. We know that conspiracy

theories, anti-scientific attitudes, a lack of social solidarity, racist and misogynist language, and support for authoritarian figures such as Trump are widespread among white people (and others), including members of the Teamsters union. Many who hold such views and attitudes do not believe in the human causes of global warming, do not believe in the efficacy of vaccination, masking, and social distancing as a response to the virus, have no commitment to equality for all, no longer support democratic institutions such as respect for one-person, one-vote elections, and some have come to support Trump and the Republican Party with its racism and its pro-business and anti-labor policies. Confronting and changing such views is essential and would be a big job for any union leader. But it is imperative that the Teamsters too take up these problems if they are to protect and improve workers lives and the lives of all in our society. Taking on those issues means building a massive progressive working-class movement, the only thing that can possibly change society for the better.

Unions have always stood for the idea that we join together in solidarity for the good of all, both in the workplace and in society. A genuinely progressive union movement would have carried out health education on a broad scale among unionists, would have demanded in the beginning to play a central role in vaccination campaigns, and would have taken the lead in demanding vaccination for all Americans and for people throughout the world as the necessary measure to protect all and to stop the continuing mutation of the virus into new variants. But some union leaders caved into outspoken conspiracy promoters, anti-vaxxers, and libertarian individualists and resisted both vaccination and masking mandates in the name of 'freedom' or bogus 'religious exceptions'.

Similarly, the Teamsters new leadership should begin educating the membership broadly on the issue of ending the use of all carbon fuels in order to stop global warning, framing it as a fight against the powerful gas and oil companies that dominate national politics and lead the country into foreign wars. It is a fight against the internal combustion engine, a struggle to end the use of carbon fuels completely - and so, it is a particular challenge to the transportation industry, its unions, and workers. The Teamsters, working with environmental groups, will have to develop a convincing strategy for a transition for the millions of workers who will be affected and a plan to turn that strategy into legislation. Sean O'Brien may have opinions on such issues, but there don't seem to be many in the public record.

With the rightwing authoritarians blaming workers of color and immigrants for the nation's problem, the working class has become deeply divided. Trump and the Republicans have blamed Mexicans, the Chinese, and the Arab-Muslim people for the nation's problems, while the real enemy is at home: the American capitalist class. The new Teamster leadership will have to develop a program to fight racism, to defend workers of color and immigrants, goals that can be translated into contract demands and legislation, because if we do not defend people of color and immigrants, we will be unable to defend and build a united labor movement. In fighting for all of these things, Labor Notes and other progressive pro-labor organizations could play a constructive role in helping the Teamsters.

If the Teamsters union is to become more democratic, more powerful, and more politically influential, it will take a massive rank-and-file movement from below. Such a movement, arising from the grassroots, would need to use its economic and social power to confront employers and to resist government interference or repression. Like all earlier labor and social movements, Teamsters will have to be prepared to break the law. Perhaps the OZ slate and Teamsters United victory, representing as it does a break from twenty-five years of conservative leaders, will create the opening for such a progressive development. But the ranks will have to break from the practice of business unionism and reject the notion of reform from above. Socialists, with their opposition to the capitalist system, their critical analysis of the labor bureaucracy, and their commitment to democracy and workers' power could play an important role in such a movement. •

This article began as a presentation to the Socialist Project of Canada's Labour Committee. The author thanks the participants for their questions and remarks. Thanks to the various former and current Teamsters and TDU members who spoke with me. And thanks as well to Kim Moody and Lois Weiner for reading and commenting on this article. I alone am responsible for this final version.

Dan La Botz

P.S.

- The Bullet. February 16, 2022:
<https://socialistproject.ca/2022/02/prospects-for-teamsters-under-new-leadership/#more>
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