

The Teamsters election and its significance for the working class

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The election of James P. Hoffa as Teamsters president should be the occasion to draw some conclusions about the officially sponsored 'reform' of the largest private sector union in the US. For nearly a decade those inside and outside of the government, including the news media and various middle class left groups, have presented the changes in the Teamsters union as the model for revitalizing the American labor movement and making the unions more militant, democratic and responsive to their members.

Last year former Teamsters President Ron Carey, long promoted as the head of this phony reform movement, resigned in disgrace after revelations that he and his aides embezzled nearly \$1 million in union funds for his reelection campaign. With the election of Hoffa, the net result of this decade-long process is that the Teamsters is now being run by a man whose main base of support is the 'old guard' of union officials, long reputed to have ties to the mob and notorious for violent attacks against critics and opponents within the union.

This experience has underscored the fact that the Teamsters, and more generally the entire AFL-CIO, have ceased in any way to represent the interests of the working class. The aspirations and concerns of workers cannot find positive expression through these corrupt and bureaucratically controlled organizations.

The first noteworthy fact about the recent election was the massive abstention by rank-and-file Teamsters. Only 356,000 Teamsters, or 25 percent of the union's 1.4 million members in the US and Canada, returned their mail-in ballots. Hoffa won with 194,000 votes, or 14 percent of the eligible voters. His chief opponent, Tom Leedham, received 140,000 votes, representing 10 percent of the membership.

To a great extent the outcome of the election was determined by defections within the contending factions of the union bureaucracy. Hoffa garnered the support of many Teamsters officials, particularly in New York and Philadelphia, who had backed former Teamsters president Ron Carey in 1996. Leedham was left with those locals, primarily in the warehouse division that he leads, where former Carey supporters gathered votes for him.

The turnout of rank-and-file Teamsters was so low, even lower than the turnout in a typical election for US Congress, that it must say something about how workers view the union bureaucracy and the organization itself.

In the end, hundreds of thousands of truckers, warehouse workers and other Teamsters were presented with no real alternative. On the one hand there was Leedham, the candidate identified with the discredited Carey faction. On the other, Hoffa, whose base is the remnants of the old-line bureaucrats. Both candidates emerged out of the same bureaucratic milieu. They shared a common reactionary outlook: an undying support for capitalism and hostility towards socialism, economic nationalism, and deep opposition to an insurgent movement of the working class.

It was no accident that these were the only alternatives that emerged from the Teamsters union. After decades of labor-management collusion and suppression of internal opposition, workers were left with two equally

reactionary factions of the Teamsters bureaucracy. The at times bitter conflicts between them did not concern the interests of Teamsters members, but were bound up with relations with different sections of big business and the government.

Teamsters 'reform'

The so-called reform of the Teamsters union began in 1989 when the Bush administration, as part of an agreement to settle a Justice Department racketeering suit against the union, placed the Teamsters under federal supervision. Shortly afterwards the Labor Department, with the blessing of the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU)--an opposition caucus founded by the old International Socialists group--began to promote Ron Carey, a longtime bureaucrat in the Teamsters local at a United Parcel Service hub in New York City, as the leader of a new rank-and-file reform movement. These same forces facilitated Carey's election as president in 1991.

Once in power, Carey signed a series of concessionary contracts with the trucking companies, UPS and other employers, and blocked any serious struggle against the destruction of jobs and union-busting by companies such as Knight-Ridder and Gannett, the owners of the Detroit newspapers. Carey's major innovation was his establishment of new political relations. Carey endorsed Clinton and reversed the Teamsters longstanding policy of backing Republican candidates. He engineered the reentry of the Teamsters union into the AFL-CIO and backed John Sweeney and Richard Trumka in the shakeup of the AFL-CIO leadership in 1995. For these reasons Carey was hailed by sections of the news media, as well as the middle class lefts, as a 'progressive.'

By 1997, however, Carey was finished. The man who supposedly was the embodiment of union reform was implicated in an intricate money-swapping scheme. When he was faced with the possibility of losing the 1996 election to Hoffa, it became apparent that Carey had no real mass base of support among rank-and-file workers to which he could turn. His 'movement'--hailed by the news media, the TDU and various left groups--turned out to be nothing more than a myth. Carey was forced to seek help from his friends in AFL-CIO bureaucracy and Democratic Party, and initiated the illegal funding scheme which allowed him to narrowly win reelection.

The removal of Carey prompted many radicals to complain of a government witch-hunt aimed at ridding the union of a militant leader. Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, government overseers did everything possible to keep Carey in place. They only moved against the Teamsters president when his aides provided damning testimony of his direct involvement in the embezzlement of union funds.

Who is Hoffa?

Hoffa was clearly not the government's first choice to run the Teamsters.

However, he was the only one left standing amid the wreckage of 10 years of bitter factional struggles, government supervision, declining membership rolls and financial bankruptcy. Only Hoffa had an apparatus capable of taking control of the union and preventing its demise. For this reason government monitors did not disqualify Hoffa from the election although they had ample evidence of wrongdoing on his part in the 1996 elections. The government's number one priority--from the promotion of Carey to the decision to allow Hoffa to run--has been to shore up the Teamsters bureaucracy and keep it from collapsing.

Hoffa capitalized on the reputation of his father, Jimmy Hoffa, the head of the Teamsters from 1955 to 1971, to win the election. The elder Hoffa has repeatedly been referred to in the news media as the 'legendary Teamsters leader.' In fact, much of the elder Hoffa's reputation is pure legend. He led the union during the postwar boom when the policies of class compromise predominated. The increases in living standards which Teamsters enjoyed during this time--when Hoffa consolidated the union and its relations with the trucking industry--had more to do with his good fortune of leading the union during this period than it did with his prosecution of the class struggle.

Jimmy Hoffa's contributions were far less heroic than the myths that surrounded him. He began his career in the union bureaucracy as a strong-arm man for Daniel Tobin, the Teamsters leader from 1907 to 1952. According to James P. Cannon, the leader of the American Trotskyists at the time, Tobin was known as 'The Mad Dog of the Labor Movement' for the gangster methods he employed to raid other unions, suppress strikes and crush rank-and-file opposition. Tobin used the anticommunist Hoffa to witch-hunt the Trotskyists and other socialists who led major struggles, such as the 1934 Minneapolis General Strike, which transformed the Teamsters into a mass industrial union.

In his own rise to the top of the Teamsters the elder Hoffa made a devil's bargain with the Mafia. In return for 'the muscle' needed to force recalcitrant companies to sign contracts, to protect those who had sweetheart deals against competitors and to settle scores with union opponents, Hoffa opened the way for the mob to consolidate its control over the Teamsters. In 1975 he paid for these connections with his life.

Unlike his father, who began as a worker in a Detroit warehouse and rose through the ranks, the younger Hoffa never worked as a Teamster. In 1991 he was barred from running for union president for this reason. Hoffa overcame this problem by getting a job on the staff of Larry Brennan, a Michigan Teamsters official long reputed to have mob ties, and who was the overseer of a union welfare fund from which federal monitors say \$725,000 was misappropriated. Many of Hoffa's supporters are former members of BLAST (Brotherhood of Loyal Americans and Strong Teamsters), a group sponsored by the International Teamsters leadership which beat up dissident union members in the 1970s and '80s.

Hoffa made his election pitch as a real reformer who led militant struggles against the employers. However his record tells a different story. He played a crucial role in the union's betrayal of the 41-month-long strike and lockout of newspaper workers at the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News*, where the majority of workers are Teamsters. At a rally in July 1995, days after the strike began, Hoffa joined AFL-CIO leaders in promoting the lie that consumer boycotts and similar protests had led to 'victories' in other newspaper strikes, thus helping pave the way for the isolation and demoralization of the workers in the face of management's strike-breaking operation. Nearly 1,000 workers remain locked out in the Detroit dispute.

Hoffa has also been conspicuously silent about the ongoing confrontation with United Parcel Service, involving some 170,000 Teamsters members. For his own purposes Hoffa did not criticize Carey's claims after the 1997 UPS strike that the union had forced the company to create 2,000 new full-time positions each year. UPS has since notified the union that it will not add the jobs this year, and has laid off workers,

saying it has not recovered its pre-strike business. The company has deliberately used more supervisors and demanded increased output from UPS workers, instead of creating full-time jobs.

Rather than conducting any struggles, Hoffa has announced plans to establish even closer relations with the employers. To overcome the union's financial crisis he is proposing to offer Teamsters credit cards, insurance policies and other products sold by companies willing to share profits with the union. Politically, Hoffa has close connections with right-wing Republicans such as Utah Senator Orrin Hatch and Michigan Congressman Peter Hoekstra, and has indicated that he will create the largest union political action committee and revert to the Teamsters' traditional policy of funneling money to the Republicans.

The lessons to be learned

A number of political lessons can be drawn from the last decade. The first is that the genuine revival of the workers movement cannot be carried out by any section of the labor bureaucracy. Nor can it proceed on the basis of the bureaucracy's reactionary political outlook.

Many struggles will erupt in the future, both by workers in the unions as well as by the tens of millions of workers outside of them. This poses crucial questions to the working class. Should these struggles be oriented towards the supposed militant revival of organizations which have passed through decades of degeneration and are alienated from the broad masses of working people? Or should the starting point of such struggles be the building of a mass political movement of the working class to advance a socialist alternative to the profit system?

The recent experience within the Teamsters union highlights the futility of the first perspective, and points to the necessity of workers taking a new road of struggle.

See Also:
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