

New Directions faction takes control of New York City transit union

Alan Whyte
9 February 2001

The leadership of the local union representing 36,000 New York City bus and subway workers suffered a humiliating defeat in the recent election for officers. The vote marked the first time since the founding of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) in the 1930s that the incumbent leadership failed to win reelection or install its chosen successors.

The president of TWU Local 100, Willie James, came in dead last in a three-way contest, with only 3,786 votes out of a total of about 21,000 ballots cast. The incumbent bureaucracy was split and Eddie Melendez, who ran with the backing of most of the union's old guard, did not do much better, receiving 4,347 votes. Both of these candidates combined managed to receive only 40 percent of the total vote. Roger Toussaint, the presidential candidate for the New Directions (ND) faction, received almost 12,500 votes, or about 60 percent of the total number of ballots, and has captured the leadership of the union.

New Directions, founded some 15 years ago on a vague platform promising union democracy and more trade union militancy, has regularly polled a majority in the subway division of the union, but has never before won the major posts. This time, however, it swept all the top offices.

During the course of the past decade, the TWU officials have become increasingly discredited, negotiating one concessions contract after another. Transit workers have endured years of inadequate wages, worsening working conditions and tightening discipline.

The frustration of the rank-and-file reached the boiling point in the last contract fight. When their contract expired in mid-December 1999, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani obtained court injunctions that threatened the union and its membership with astronomical fines, not only if they went on strike, but as punishment for even discussing strike action. The TWU leadership had previously endorsed Giuliani for mayor. As the contract deadline approached, they gave the signal to the mayor that they needed and would use his injunction threats to keep the transit workers under control.

At two mass membership meetings held on the last day of the old contract workers expressed their overwhelming hostility to the injunctions and to the union bureaucrats who obediently read them out to the rank and file. Fearing a spontaneous rebellion if the workers were told to report for work without a contract, the union officials and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority quickly came up with an agreement only two hours after the old one expired.

The last-minute deal was reached not simply because both union and management feared the transit workers. They were especially afraid of the support these workers would have received from other workers in New York, a city that has seen social and economic inequality grow to unprecedented levels. The contract negotiated in the final hours not only contained an inadequate wage hike, but also gave management significant productivity and health benefit concessions.

The contract struggle was followed by more problems for the Local 100 bureaucracy. Eight top officers, including the president and the secretary-treasurer, were found to have used their union credit cards to pay for personal expenses amounting to \$52,000. This revelation—undoubtedly

just the tip of the iceberg—coincided with numerous other corruption scandals in New York City unions.

This growing crisis led to a split within the Local 100 leadership as the union election approached. International President Sonny Hall decided to dump Willie James, although Hall had himself selected James to run the local in 1996. Most of the local officials wound up supporting Hall's surrogate candidate, Melendez, a relative unknown who had served obediently in the union apparatus. James, after first bowing out of the race, decided to run for reelection after all, but the final result indicates that even had he not done so, the candidate backed by the International leadership would have been badly beaten.

The New Directions victory came largely by default, as a vote of no confidence in the incumbent bureaucrats. But as transit workers are already beginning to suspect, it will not mean any fundamental change in policy. The most persuasive evidence that these so-called “insurgents” will continue with business as usual is the effusive praise Toussaint has received from city union officials and the media.

Toussaint's candidacy received very favorable coverage in the press. The *Village Voice*, in an article published after the ballots had already been mailed to the membership last December, explained that Toussaint had not supported a strike when the contract expired in mid-December of 1999. Instead, he advocated what he called a “time-out,” to extend the contract expiration date for one or two days. This acknowledgment in the *Village Voice* was Toussaint's way of announcing that he was a man with whom the ruling establishment could collaborate.

The New York tabloids were favorably impressed with New Directions in general and Toussaint in particular. They described him as a courageous fighter against British colonialism in his native country of Trinidad, comparing him to the original TWU president, Mike Quill, who fought the Black and Tans in his native Ireland, and who led a successful transit strike in 1966. Such praise from the *Daily News* and the *New York Post* would have been inconceivable in response to a genuine rebellion by the rank-and-file against the union bureaucracy.

TWU International President Sonny Hall also welcomed New Directions' victory. After years of denunciations of this rival faction, he was quoted in a civil service paper as saying, “I think it's to their [New Direction's] credit it's such a large vote ... it's clear they [the membership] wanted change. As I do with every local, I will be providing assistance to [Mr. Toussaint] during the transition.”

The NYC Central Labor Council, the umbrella group of New York unions, gave Toussaint a warm welcome as well, and the new Local 100 president returned the praise. In his first statement in the union newspaper, Toussaint wrote, “We thank the International and other NY unions for their many offers of help. Numerous political officials have also called with good wishes.”

New Directions long ago demonstrated that it did not represent a threat to the big business status quo. During the 1999 contract struggle, for instance, none of the New Directions executive board members, though

they constituted about 45 percent of that body, waged a fight for strike action in defiance of the injunction. Such a fight would have raised fundamental political questions: the need to mobilize not only the transit workers, but every section of the working class against both the Democrats and the Republicans. New Directions has always opposed such a political struggle.

Although New Directions came out against the union's endorsement of Giuliani for mayor in 1997, it never stated what it considered the alternative to be. By implication, this amounted to an endorsement of Democratic Party candidate Ruth Messinger. New Directions, like the rest of the TWU leadership, consistently opposed any struggle by workers to create a political alternative to the parties controlled by big business.

In its election program, it tried to camouflage this position, writing that the union should "Expand our political alternatives so that we no longer rely solely on the Democratic and Republican parties." This statement, typical of New Directions' political double-talk, was meant to suggest a new political strategy, while in fact opposing one. Clearly, if workers are to no longer rely *solely* on these two parties, then they must continue to rely on the Democrats and Republicans *in part*.

New Directions never identified the class interests that the Democratic and Republican parties represent. They never explained that they are both instruments of big business, which is why all the major Democratic Party politicians supported the Republican mayor's injunction against the workers one year ago.

In order to understand the role of this grouping, it is necessary to examine its history. It was founded by radicals who had been members of the Socialist Workers Party or other political tendencies that had left that organization. Products of organizations steeped in political opportunism and adaptation to the Stalinist, social-democratic and trade union bureaucracies, these veterans of middle-class protest politics were convinced that it was impossible to develop a socialist alternative to the bureaucratized trade union apparatus. They despaired of developing genuine class consciousness among the workers. They decided to appeal to the membership of the union based on the lowest common denominator—anger at the status quo, together with militant-sounding trade union slogans.

In their quest to gain union office over the past decade, New Directions advanced narrow trade unionist conceptions that were in some instances even more right-wing than the policies of the incumbent leadership. In the 1996 union elections, for example, they called for a more vigorous crackdown on drivers of "gypsy vans," as if this section of predominately immigrant workers was responsible for the loss of transit jobs.

They condemned Willie James for suggesting that the Transit Authority use its surplus to provide improved service and create new jobs for the unemployed. It was not James' hypocrisy and empty promises that disturbed them, but the content of his proposal. They accused him of "representing riders, WEPs [public assistance recipients forced to work in transit and other public services in exchange for their welfare benefits]...everyone but transit workers." In other words, they were telling Local 100 members that their interests were at odds with those of van drivers, the unemployed and other workers who ride the transit system.

As they became increasingly indistinguishable from the bureaucrats they were seeking to replace, a layer within New Directions followed their approach to its logical conclusion, leaving New Directions to join forces with Willie James. ND condemned these individuals for selling out their faction for positions in the apparatus. In reality, such people were merely carrying to its logical conclusion the trajectory of New Directions' political outlook.

The candidacy of Roger Toussaint was a significant marker in the evolution of the New Directions faction. Although he was a union activist, Toussaint did not even join New Directions for his first 10 years as a transit employee. While some New Directions supporters decided they

could do better by joining the incumbent union apparatus, Toussaint pursued the opposite tactic. Sensing the growing opposition to the old guard, he allied himself with the ex-radicals who had founded New Directions.

When it came time last year for New Directions to nominate a presidential candidate, Toussaint put himself forward and was chosen over Tim Schermerhorn, one of the founders of New Directions and its presidential candidate in each of the last three elections. Schermerhorn had won 49 percent of the vote in his last attempt. Nevertheless, he was unceremoniously discarded in favor of Toussaint.

The opportunist logic of seeking the largest number of votes without regard to issues of principle had come back to haunt the old New Directions leadership. Given the basis on which they had built their faction, it was indeed difficult to oppose Toussaint as their presidential candidate. The fact that he was considered more acceptable to TWU President Sonny Hall was a major argument for his selection.

The victory of New Directions in the New York transit union follows a pattern that has been seen in other unions. Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), which occupied leading positions in the Teamsters union and played a key role in getting Ron Carey elected as its national president, pursued a similar trajectory. The ex-radicals who founded TDU simply helped to install another corrupt leadership in the Teamsters.

The TDU presented Carey to the membership as an honest and militant leader who would fight mob control of the union. In its own newsletter, New Directions had joined in the praise for Carey, pointing to him as a model for the kind of leadership it was fighting for in the TWU and the rest of the labor movement.

This was before it was discovered that Carey's supporters were involved in a scheme to use money from the union treasury, laundered through contributions to the Democratic Party, to finance his reelection campaign. The reason for this illegal maneuver was desperation over his reelection chances. Carey and his backers knew that his performance as Teamsters president had only alienated the majority of the union rank and file.

Since Carey's fall, New Directions has not mentioned his name, nor have these supposed militants made any attempt to explain their previous praise for him.

Whether Toussaint and company find themselves mired in scandal and meet a fate similar to Carey's remains to be seen. One thing is certain, however: their victory over the long-entrenched incumbents in TWU Local 100 will do nothing to free transit workers from the bureaucratic straitjacket that the union has become.

Far from the New Directions victory representing a break from the union's complicity with the Transit Authority and with big business interests in New York, it is a continuation of the same policy in a slightly refurbished form. Given the internal rot of the existing leadership and the growing anger among transit workers, even the most hidebound bureaucrats in New York recognized the need for a changing of the guard at Local 100. This is the role that Toussaint hopes to fill.

These changes at the top of the union, however, cannot forestall inevitable confrontations between transit workers and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, backed by Wall Street and both big business parties. These coming struggles will place before these workers and the entire working class the need to break free of the union bureaucracy and build a new political party to unite all sections of workers in a struggle against the corporate and political establishment and the profit system which they defend.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

