

US Teamsters union campaigns against Mexican truckers

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When it comes to an opportunity to promote national chauvinism and obstruct the international solidarity of workers, the American labor bureaucracy rarely misses a chance. Witness the foul campaign currently being run by the Teamsters union to block Mexican truck drivers from operating in the United States.

Under the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Mexican trucks were to be allowed to travel anywhere in four border states—Arizona, California, New Mexico, Texas—by December 1995, and to freely deliver goods throughout the US by the year 2000. After heavy lobbying by the Teamsters, the Clinton administration, citing supposed concerns over truck safety, blocked implementation of the cross-border provisions in 1995 and restricted Mexican trucks to a narrow strip along the border where freight is picked up by American trucks. In 2000 Clinton extended the ban, which was later ruled a violation of US obligations under the trade agreement. The move, however, was followed by the Teamsters' decision to back Al Gore's presidential bid.

After Bush announced his intention to reverse Clinton's measures and open the borders to Mexican truckers by next January the Teamsters mounted an all-out appeal to Congress to stop it. The campaign, which included radio ads, caravans and repeated Washington appearances by union President James P. Hoffa, has been largely credited for the July 26 Senate vote to back tougher safety standards than Bush wants for Mexican trucks and an even more restrictive plan passed by the House last month. The union is now campaigning to win the support of enough Congressmen to overturn an expected veto by Bush.

Hoffa has cynically sought to deflect charges that the union is anti-Mexican and protectionist by claiming his opposition is based on a concern for the safety of American motorists. Summing up his July 18 testimony before a Senate committee, a union press release says Hoffa opposed "recklessly allowing foreign trucks onto US highways without the proper safety precautions."

In other venues union officials have been less cautious

about appealing to racist and chauvinist sentiments. A statement on the union's web site, for example, slanders Mexican drivers as potential criminals and says opening the border would "make it easier for traffickers to smuggle illegal drugs into the US." It goes on to quote a US State Department report, claiming "no country in the world poses a more immediate narcotics threat to the US than Mexico" and suggests that drug cartels would launder money through Mexican trucking companies operating in the US.

Anyone who has followed the record of the Teamsters bureaucracy knows its sudden concern for the safety of workers and the driving public is disingenuous to say the least. Over the last 25 years the Teamsters leadership has betrayed numerous strikes, violently suppressed rank-and-file opposition to its collaboration with the trucking bosses and signed one sweetheart deal after another, allowing trucking companies to cut costs, slash jobs and increase productivity. The union has also been oblivious to the conditions of nonunion drivers and independent owner-operators, who in many cases—once you add up truck payments, fuel costs, insurance and hours worked—earn less than the minimum wage. Because of longer working hours, exhausting schedules and unsafe equipment—for union and nonunion drivers alike—the trucking industry has become the nation's number one on-the-job killer, recording more than 10 percent of all occupational fatalities.

Big-truck accidents in the US kill more than 5,000 people each year and safety analysts predict that increased truck traffic, fierce competition between carriers, pressure for just-in-time deliveries and lax governmental regulations will raise the death toll to 6,000 in coming years.

During his various Washington appearances Hoffa repeatedly warned about sleepless Mexican drivers, with little or no restrictions on the number of hours they can drive, threatening the safety of US highways. But a study by the US Department of Transportation shows that unionized truckers in America average 66 hours on the road each week and nonunion drivers 75 hours a week—both in violation of the federal government's 60-hour limit. The union also cited

records that 40 percent of Mexican vehicles checked at the border were found to be in violation of safety standards. Yet the Teamsters are not howling about the fact that 25 percent of all US trucks on the road fail similar inspections.

No doubt the American Trucking Association and the various big business groups backing Bush's plan see the opening up of the border as an opportunity to use lower-cost Mexican drivers and vehicles to cut jobs and extract further concessions from American drivers. But the notion that the Teamsters bureaucracy is waging a struggle to defend the jobs and living standards of its members is fraud, which is exposed by examining the union's record. Since the deregulation of the trucking industry in 1980 the number of workers covered by the agreement with major freight carriers has plummeted from 300,000 to 120,000 and real wages for Teamsters truck drivers have fallen by 33 percent. In 1998 the Teamsters signed a five-year pact, which gave a green light to further cost-cutting, the use of low-paid, part-time employees and expansion of nonunion companies, which move 90 percent of the freight in the US.

Insofar as the Teamsters bureaucracy is concerned about the loss of jobs, it is only because the union's dwindling dues base threatens the perks and privileges of the official apparatus. The financial crisis afflicting the bureaucracy—long known for its corruption and gangsterism—did not stop Hoffa's representatives from voting at their recent Las Vegas convention to increase the daily meal allowance for union officials to \$75 a day. At the same time, union officials rejected a proposal to increase strike benefits from the current level of \$55 a week.

Moreover, the bureaucracy's opposition to Mexican drivers is selective. It is noteworthy that the Teamsters bureaucracy has not—as of yet—launched a campaign against truckers from Canada being given access to US markets under NAFTA. That is not because the labor bureaucracy is any less hostile to Canadian workers, but only because the Teamsters also has the franchise in Canada and collects dues from drivers there, unlike in Mexico.

Anti-Mexican racism is not foreign to the Teamsters union. In the early 1970s growers in California called upon the union to forestall and defeat an organizing drive by the United Farm Workers. Teamsters thugs used violence and red-baiting to intimidate Mexican migrant workers fighting for better conditions, while the union signed several pro-company contracts.

The essential motivation behind the bureaucracy's campaign is to defend the interests of a section of the US trucking industry, which is threatened by Mexican trucking companies.

Don Owens, a Teamsters spokesman, spelled this out recently, saying if US safety standards are lowered to

accommodate Mexican trucks, then Mexican companies would have an unfair advantage against US carriers. "We believe that our workers are able to compete against Mexican trucking companies, as long as they meet our safety standards," he said. The logic of this argument is that US trucking companies are unfairly burdened by air pollution and safety standards, something the union has suggested in several of its statements. Having already helped the trucking companies slash wages and boost productivity, is there any doubt that the Teamsters will join the Bush administration at some future date to dispense with safety regulations and other measures that are deemed obstructive to the competitiveness of US carriers?

The Teamsters bureaucracy is reviving the American-first demagoguery long used by the AFL-CIO to divert workers' concerns over growing economic insecurity away from big business and into denunciations of foreign workers for "stealing American jobs."

Joining in this revolting campaign were the Democrats who voted overwhelmingly in the Senate and House to block Mexican truckers from entering the US. Included among them were California Senator Barbara Boxer, a so-called progressive and friend of immigrants. So blatant was the Democrats' appeal to anti-Mexican sentiment that Mississippi Republican Trent Lott taunted them with charges of racism.

Another political figure who politically lined up with the Teamsters was former Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader.

The promotion of this nationalist poison points more than anything else to the worthlessness of the labor bureaucracy from the standpoint of defending the interests of the working class. The starting point of any genuine struggle to defend the jobs and living standards of truck drivers is the forging of the closest unity of US, Mexican and Canadian workers against the transportation corporations and the multinational conglomerates they serve. A strategy to fight global capitalism must be based on a correct appraisal of the objective tendencies towards the greater integration of the world economy and commonality of the problems facing the international working class, not the backward and reactionary outlook of nationalism.



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