

# Trotskyism and the Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934

## Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934, by Bryan Palmer

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24 June 2015

Book Review: *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934*, by Bryan Palmer. Haymarket Press, 2014.

*Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934*, by historian Bryan Palmer, chronicles the Trotskyist movement's leadership of one of the most important labor struggles in US history.

Along with the San Francisco longshoremen's strike and the Toledo Auto-Lite strike, which took place the same year, the Minneapolis Teamsters strike of 1934 heralded a revolt of rank-and-file industrial workers that, in the depths of the Great Depression, posed the most serious challenge to American capitalism in the last century.

In all three strikes, socialists figured prominently, but only in Minneapolis did Trotskyists provide leadership. Palmer demonstrates that it was their revolutionary perspective, in contrast to that of the Stalinists and reformist socialists who influenced events in San Francisco and Toledo, respectively, that made the struggle in Minnesota the most successful of the three.

Minneapolis demonstrated the ability of Trotskyism, that is, contemporary Marxism, to find a mass audience and win the allegiance of broad sections of workers. It showed as well the revolutionary potential of the American working class.

Palmer, a historian at Trent University in Canada and the author of the sole biography of James P. Cannon, the founder of US Trotskyism, expands beyond previous work on a subject that, given its historical importance, has received scant attention. The most important previous accounts are the four-volume compilation by Farrell Dobbs, who was a participant in the strike, and the 1937 book *American City*, by Charles Rumford Walker. Palmer makes use of these books as well as unpublished work by Walker, but also incorporates the results of new archival research on the role of Cannon and other figures in the Trotskyist Communist League of America (CLA).

In his acknowledgements, Palmer says he decided to write a separate book on the 1934 strike after the chapter on Minneapolis in the second installment of his yet-to-be completed three-volume study of Cannon's life grew to 225 pages, and as "class-struggle showed some signs of revival in the United States."

Cannon was expelled from the Stalinist Communist Party (CP) in 1929 after smuggling out of the Soviet Union a copy of Trotsky's *The Draft Program of the Communist International: A Criticism of Fundamentals*, which had fallen into his hands by chance, and then, on returning to the US, defending Trotsky's positions. Much of the rest of what was to become the Communist League of America (CLA) was expelled from the CP for refusing to denounce Cannon.

In an appendix, "American Trotskyism, 1929-1933," Palmer explains

the difficulties faced by the young movement. In these "dog days," as Cannon called them, the CLA existed primarily as a propaganda group attempting to win healthy elements out of the CP.

Minneapolis changed that. The transportation hub of the American Northwest, Minneapolis was home to one of the most ruthless anti-working class organizations in the country, the Citizens Alliance. The Alliance employed a private army of spies and thugs to eradicate any hint of working class organization.

Yet Minneapolis had the second-largest group of Trotskyists in the country, after New York City. Among them were the Dunne brothers—Vincent, Miles and Grant. The sons of Irish immigrants, the Dunes were expelled from the CP for refusing to join their brother, Bill Dunne, in denouncing Cannon.

Vincent Dunne and Carl Skoglund were the central leaders of the Minneapolis Trotskyists and Teamsters Local Union 574, in which militant union leader Bill Brown also figured prominently. Skoglund was a self-educated immigrant from Sweden. Dobbs, a 27-year-old truck yard worker who had dropped out of the University of Minnesota in the depths of the Depression, was recruited during the strike.

Workers faced long odds. Standing in the way were not only the capitalists with their Citizens Alliance, but supposed allies. Floyd Olson, the leader of the radical middle-class Farmer-Labor Party, sat in the governor's mansion. In contrast to the mayor and police chief of Minneapolis, who openly avowed their aim of crushing the workers, Olson postured as a friend of labor while, as Palmer shows, working behind the scenes to end the strike.

The national Teamsters union under Dan Tobin bitterly opposed the industrial organization of trucking. Before 1934, the Teamsters barred from joining all those who were not drivers, and even certain categories of drivers, such as long-distance truckers. Closely aligned with the Roosevelt administration, Tobin and his allies sought to undermine Local 574 and rebaited its Trotskyist leadership.

Then there were the Stalinists of the CP. In its ultra-left "Third Period," the CP had no direct influence among the Minneapolis truckers, whom it accused of belonging to a "fascist" union. The CP spent the strike telling workers that the need of the hour was to drive Olson from office and claiming that the Trotskyist trade unionists were spies.

Given this historical context, the strike's successes—union recognition, freeing of jailed strikers, and wage increases—are remarkable. The power of the Citizens Alliance was broken and for the first time since the turn of the century, workers in the Twin Cities could organize without fear of being fired, beaten or murdered.

The ramifications of the victory in Minneapolis were seen some two

years later in the wave of sit-down strikes in Flint, Michigan and Detroit, where auto workers emulated the tactics and militancy of the Minneapolis workers. The upsurge that began in Minneapolis, San Francisco and Toledo led to the break with the conservative, craft union-based American Federal of Labor (AFL) and the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1938.

Palmer's book recounts the strike's complicated unfolding. The initial two-and-a-half-day walkout, the first in a series of three strikes, began on February 7, 1934 when coal yard drivers struck in the depths of winter, when the need for fuel was most acute. Three years of preparation, led by Skoglund, the Dunnes and Brown, paid dividends, as 600 organized truckers managed to shut down 65 of the city's 67 transport firms. Fully expecting violence from the Citizens Alliance and the police, Skoglund and Dunne understood that success depended on drawing on the strength of as much of the working class as possible.

Palmer illustrates how their socialist perspective guided decisions made in the strike, including the mobilization of the wives, sisters and daughters of the coal yard drivers into the Women's Auxiliary, which organized a field hospital to tend to workers wounded by police and hired thugs and prepared food for strikers and their families. The strike pioneered the "flying picket"—patrols of cars and trucks bearing a union logo that stopped strikebreaking deliveries. At every point, the aim was to inspire and set into motion the broadest possible solidarity and defiance of the bosses.

The major demand of the first strike was for union recognition. After the brief walkout, the coal yard owners grudgingly acknowledged that the General Drivers' Union commanded the support of some of their workers. They agreed to a federal labor board-supervised election, where 77 percent of the 780 workers who cast ballots voted to join the union. Nevertheless, the employers refused to sign a contract and insisted on their right to fire and blackball union workers "on the basis of merit."

Aiding and abetting the employers were Tobin and the national Teamsters leadership, which suspended the Minneapolis local and forbade it from striking again or recruiting non-drivers. The Teamsters tops insisted that negotiations continue under the auspices of Roosevelt's Regional Labor Board.

Anticipating a counteroffensive by the employers, the leadership of Local 574 pressed the advantage it had gained in February, launching a campaign to enlist all categories of transport industry workers through the development of rank-and-file committees. Thousands flocked to the local, and by April, Local 574 had grown from 75 members a year earlier to 3,000, including non-driving inside workers.

Skoglund and the Dunnes prepared for battle by enlisting allies among the unemployed, other unions and the radical Farmers Holiday Association, and by readying a strike hospital, a food kitchen and a quasi-military strike headquarters. Six thousand workers now responded to the call for a second strike on May 15, when trucking firms, backed by the Citizens Alliance, rejected demands for union recognition.

Thus began the next and bloodiest phase of the struggle. Minneapolis police intervened aggressively to protect strikebreakers and violence became epidemic. But police efforts to intimidate strikers—including the ambush and savage beating of a group of strikers and their supporters, including women—failed to break the strike.

Local 574 encouraged workers to organize for self-defense. This resulted in the May 21-22 street battles that became known as "Deputies Run," in which the Teamsters and thousands of other workers routed the deputized "best citizens" of Minneapolis and their hired thugs. These forces took flight when confronted by the organized workers. The battle resulted in a wage increase and an agreement that union elections be held. Local 574 overwhelmingly won the election.

The final phase of the strike came on July 16, with union recognition again the central issue. Cannon, along with Max Shachtman, came to

Minneapolis to assist in the leadership of the struggle and publish the strike daily, *Northwest Organizer*, which Cannon later said played the decisive role in winning the strike. The *Northwest Organizer* responded to the slander and redbaiting of the politicians and the national Teamsters leadership and exposed the duplicitous role of the Farmer-Labor Party and Olson, who mobilized the National Guard against the strike in late July.

Olson's martial law order came after Bloody Friday, July 20, when police shot into a crowd of pickets while escorting strikebreaking trucks. Sixty-seven workers were wounded by the indiscriminate fire and two were killed. The funeral of John Belor and Henry Ness drew a crowd of somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 people.

Under Olson's martial law, many were arrested, including Vincent Dunne, Cannon and Shachtman. The strike nonetheless held. In the end, it was the employers who were forced to capitulate on most counts in a deal, concluded on August 18, brokered by Olson with the active intervention of Roosevelt.

The historical account of these events is not only a story of success, but also of limitations, some of which Palmer addresses. Facing relentless attacks by Tobin as well as by Stalinists, Palmer writes, "Trotskyists found themselves more and more aligned with progressive, but decidedly mainstream labor officials."

Palmer points to the campaign, led by Farrell Dobbs, to organize the over-the-road drivers into the Teamsters in the years after the Minneapolis strike. "To draw elements like Pat Corcoran (a Minneapolis Teamsters official who had turned against Tobin) towards them, the Minneapolis Trotskyist leadership of the General Drivers' Union may well have soft-peddled their revolutionary politics in the interests of promoting honest, effective, militant trade-unionism."

As a result, Palmer says, although the Trotskyist leaders of Local 574 brought some 250,000 drivers and affiliated workers in eleven states into the union by 1938, "a rank-and-file, infused with radical currents, steered in struggle, and trusting of a revolutionary leadership, did not cohere as it had in Minneapolis."

In June 1940, Trotsky pointed to these problems in a criticism of the *Northwest Organizer*. "The danger—a terrible danger—is adaptation to the pro-Rooseveltian trade unionists," Trotsky wrote. He went on to warn that in the event of war, these unionists "can smash us."

This was soon "proven all-too correct," Palmer notes. In the subsequent pages, he describes the conspiracy involving the FBI, the police, the national Teamsters leadership and thugs employed by the up-and-coming bureaucrat Jimmy Hoffa (who had been trained by Dobbs) that broke up the Minneapolis Teamsters and shut down the *Northwest Organizer*.

The key element in this attack was Roosevelt's signing of the Smith Act, which targeted 29 members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP—formed in 1938) and leaders of the Minneapolis Teamsters. The prosecution of the Trotskyists was aimed at politically decapitating the working class so that American imperialism could pursue its aims unencumbered in the coming world struggle with Germany and Japan.

On December 8, 1941, the day after Pearl Harbor, 18 defendants, including Cannon, Skoglund, V.R. Dunne and Dobbs, were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 12 months to 16 months for the "unlawful conspiracy of promoting the idea that the overthrow of the US government by force was desirable."

There is little in Palmer's book on the international context of the Minneapolis strike. The revolt of American industrial workers in 1934-1937 was part of a broader revolutionary upheaval that reached its high points in Spain and France.

The Stalinist Comintern subordinated the Spanish and French workers to the bourgeoisie via its "popular front" policy, which supplanted its former "Third Period" line. Under the banner of so-called popular fronts against fascism, European Communist parties either joined or supported capitalist governments headed by democratic factions of the bourgeoisie. The

political independence of the working class and socialist revolution were, in practice, repudiated, and the working class was politically disarmed and paralyzed in the face of the inevitable fascist counteroffensive. This paved the way for the victory of Franco in Spain and, eventually, Vichy in France.

Similarly, the labor bureaucrats who dominated the new industrial union federation, the CIO, aided by the American Stalinists in the Communist Party, promoted Roosevelt and channeled the industrial revolt back into the confines of the Democratic Party. This was the essential political preparation for US imperialism's entry into World War II.

While Stalin was utilizing Communist parties outside the Soviet Union to strangle revolutions (Spain, France), and courting the "democratic imperialists" in a vain effort to establish an alliance against German fascism, he was carrying out the blood purges of 1936-1938 that killed off the entire revolutionary generation of 1917 within Russia.

These betrayals and defeats of the European socialist revolution weighed against the insurgency of industrial workers in the US. In 1938, Trotsky urged the SWP to call for the newly formed CIO unions to build a Labor Party based on the fight for a workers' government and a socialist program. This was necessary, he insisted, to fight the pro-capitalist CIO leaders and the Stalinists, and prevent the subordination of the new mass industrial unions to the Democratic Party. "If the class struggle is not to be crushed, replaced by demoralization, then the movement must find a new channel and this channel is political," Trotsky said.

The CIO leaders and Stalinists denounced the SWP and all those who called for the continuation of the class struggle after the US entered World War II as "agents of fascism." In the aftermath of the war, an anticommunist purge was carried out in the unions, laying the basis for the merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955 and the consolidation of the unions on the basis of the subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party and the geopolitical interests of American imperialism.

While workers still won improvements in mass struggles into the 1970s, the AFL-CIO was incapable of responding in any progressive fashion to the historical decline in the world position of American capitalism and the globalization of production, which undermined all nationally based labor organizations around the world. Over the last four decades, the unions have abandoned any defense of the interests of workers and transformed themselves into direct tools of corporate management and the government.

The concluding chapter of *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934* is Palmer's weakest. He writes: "One meaning of Minneapolis, for our times, is that trade-unionism, for all of its sorry history of compromise and adaptation to the ethos of capitalism within which it lives and fights, can be turned in different directions. Once this is done, trade-unionism can be a vision as well as a power, a force for wide-ranging social change and a nursery of new possibilities of human relations."

This is false. The existing trade union organizations cannot be revived or reformed. They long ago ceased to represent or defend the interests of workers.

Moreover, 150 years of international experience demonstrate that trade unionism is not the basis for the liberation of the working class. Historically, even unions initially organized and led by Marxists have ultimately rejected the class struggle and socialism. This flows from the fact that these organizations arise from and are rooted in capitalist property relations and the nation-state system.

Palmer points to the fatal consequences of adapting to trade unionist conceptions in the 1930s, yet he advances just such an outlook today, after decades of defeats at the hands of these pro-capitalist organizations and as American imperialism is once again threatening to plunge mankind into world war.

While there may be attempts by workers, disgusted by the treachery of the official unions, to organize new ones, the next stage of development of

the working class in the United States and throughout the world will be based not on the revival of trade unionism, but rather on the development of a political struggle against capitalist exploitation, social inequality and war. The initiation of new forms of working class resistance, including factory and workplace committees in opposition to the pro-capitalist unions, will be a critical component of this fight.

There is, however, no substitute for the building of a Marxist party, with deep roots in the working class, to provide the necessary leadership and international socialist perspective for this struggle.

That is the real lesson of Minneapolis.

Palmer's conclusion does not negate the value of his research. In the coming struggles, young workers will look back to the heroic battle led by the Minneapolis Trotskyists for lessons in the fight for socialism. They will find *Revolutionary Teamsters* useful.



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