

Teamsters for a Democratic Union endorses ex-Hoffa lieutenant for union president

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On November 3 at its annual convention in Chicago, the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), a self-described “reform” faction of the bureaucracy of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), endorsed a ticket for the union’s presidential elections in 2021 led by Sean O’Brien, a former top ally of current union president James Hoffa, Jr.

O’Brien, who is running on the Teamsters United ticket, is president of Local 25 in Boston and secretary-treasurer of Joint Council 10. He was named Eastern Regional Vice President in 2011. In 2015, he made over \$300,000 per year from his various positions. His running-mate, Fred Zuckerman, is also a long-time bureaucrat. He is president of Local 89, which covers UPS’s massive Worldport air freight facility in Louisville, Kentucky. Zuckerman previously ran for president on the Teamsters United ticket in 2016, which the TDU also endorsed, and was only narrowly defeated by Hoffa.

Until very recently, O’Brien was a top Hoffa loyalist, and ran on Hoffa’s leadership slate in the 2016 elections. An ardent anticommunist and bitter factional fighter, he is notorious among workers for his brutal treatment of opponents. In 2014, O’Brien was given a wrist-slap suspension for openly threatening TDU-endorsed opponents of one of his cronies in a local election, declaring that they would have a “major problem” after the vote and would “need to be punished.” TDU reported on it on their website at the time.

O’Brien was initially chosen to lead the IBT’s negotiations for the UPS national contract; however, he was later replaced after a public rift with Hoffa. This schism, however, had a transparently mercenary character, aimed only at setting up O’Brien’s own bid for leadership of the union. Zuckerman announced only

a few months later that he would be O’Brien’s running mate.

The announcement of the O’Brien-Zuckerman ticket provoked outrage among rank-and-file workers, many of whom sincerely but mistakenly supported TDU because of their hatred of the existing Teamster leadership. TDU initially responded equivocally, acknowledging this opposition and promising a full “discussion” before a final decision would be made on their endorsement for union president. This has now been exposed as a tactical maneuver aimed at clearing the way for their falling in line behind O’Brien.

TDU’s 180-degree turn behind the thuggish O’Brien, who until yesterday had been one of TDU’s most ruthless factional opponents, exposes the critical role which the TDU plays in propping up the authority and credibility of the Teamsters bureaucracy as a whole. It has spent decades promoting hopeless illusions that the Teamsters union can be reformed.

TDU’s toothless opposition was a decisive factor in ensuring the union was able to ram through a concessions contract at UPS last year. Even though a majority voted down the contract, Hoffa used an anti-democratic provision in the union’s constitution requiring a supermajority to reject a contract when turnout is below 50 percent. While TDU formally opposed the contract, it made ratification inevitable by insisting that workers could only work within the existing structures of the union, rejecting any suggestion that workers could or should form independent organizations to defeat the contract and prepare the way for a national strike.

This is the outcome of the entire orientation on which TDU is based, pursued over the course of more than four decades. From its founding in 1976, with the support of middle-class radicals grouped around Labor

Notes (which has praised the O'Brien-Zuckerman ticket as supposed "blow" to the Hoffa administration), the TDU adamantly opposed the fight for socialist consciousness in the working class and a political break with the capitalist Democratic Party. Instead, it claimed that a struggle against the nationalist, pro-capitalist program of the unions and their alliance with the Democrats was not necessary, and that workers could defend their interests simply reshuffling the union's leading personnel.

But the union's shift, beginning in the 1970s, towards open collaboration with management was not due simply to the endemic corruption and gangsterism of the bureaucracy, which had existed for decades. Indeed, the conversion of the unions into an arm of management has been a universal experience in the unions all over the world over the same period.

The end of the post-World War II economic boom pulled the rug out from the unions' claim that continually rising living standards was possible within the framework of the capitalist system. The globalization of a capitalist production in the 1980s and 1990s delivered the final blow to the national reformist program of the trade unions, which responded by abandoning any resistance to the corporations and voluntarily collaborating in the destruction of workers' jobs and living standards in the name of making US corporations more competitive against their international rivals.

Every one of the "reform" factions founded in this period—the TDU, Miners for Democracy, the UAW's New Directions caucus, Steelworkers Fightback—succeeded only in creating new layers of the bureaucracy, every bit as hostile to the interests of workers to the layers they replaced.

In 1989, TDU supported the Justice Department's takeover of the Teamsters union under the RICO Act, claiming that federal intervention would enable workers to re-establish control over the union. In reality, the government's aim was to repair the tattered image of the notoriously gangster-ridden Teamsters union in order to head off a social explosion. In return for TDU's services in promoting the political credibility of this maneuver, several TDU candidates were brought into leadership positions in the Teamster bureaucracy. Ron Carey, the TDU-endorsed candidate in federally supervised elections, became president of the union in

1991.

Carey was no more "clean" than his predecessor. He betrayed the 16-day 1997 UPS strike, allowing UPS to introduce a second tier of full-time workers for the first time. The following year, Carey was expelled from the union by the federal oversight panel for funneling union money into his re-election campaign, using the Democratic National Committee as a fence. To this day, TDU claims the 1997 strike as a key achievement, and denounces the charges against Carey, the facts of which were beyond dispute, as a "frame-up."

For autoworkers, who face federal receivership of the United Auto Workers after a series of indictments have exposed the union as a bribed agent of the companies, the dead-end history of the TDU is a warning. The would-be reformers of the UAW, who claim that the UAW would be different if only they were given access to its vast financial resources, are perpetrating the same fraud which the TDU has for decades. Workers should be doubly suspicious of anyone promoted by pseudo left organizations such as Labor Notes or elevated to prominence by the intervention of the capitalist state.

This experience demonstrates the need for workers to form new organizations to take their struggle forward. The *World Socialist Web Site* calls for the formation of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, completely independent of, and hostile to, the union apparatus, in order to mobilize the strength of the working class. In opposition to the national protectionism of the unions, these committees should fight for the international unification of the working class in a struggle against the capitalist system and for socialism.



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