

Pseudo-left-backed candidate wins Teamsters presidency in election marked by historically low turnout

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The Teamsters United Slate, headed by Sean O'Brien, has won a clear victory in the 2021 International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) leadership elections with 68 percent of ballots cast, official tabulations confirmed this week. O'Brien, the president of Teamsters Local 25 in Boston, is a former factional ally of outgoing IBT President James Hoffa Jr. who switched allegiances to Teamsters United, which also received the support of the pseudo-left caucus Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU).

O'Brien's opponent was Steve Vairma, an IBT international vice president at-large who received approximately 32 percent of the vote. Vairma was the candidate of the Teamster Power slate and had the endorsement of Hoffa, who has been the head of the IBT for more than 20 years.

But the most notable aspect of the election was the incredibly low turnout. Out of a total membership of over 1.3 million across the United States and Canada, only 172,051 votes have been counted as of this writing with only a handful of locals left to report, a turnout of only 12.9 percent. This is slightly more than one-quarter the lowest turnout ever for a US presidential election, 48.9 percent, in the 1924 election won by Calvin Coolidge. It is also a significantly lower turnout than the last Teamsters election, won by Hoffa, in which 198,778 voted.

Not a single large local had a turnout which even approached 50 percent. Locals at major cities across the country had some of the lowest participation in the election. Turnout was 6.8 percent at Local 210 in New York City; 2.3 percent at Local 730 in Washington D.C.; 4 percent at Local 214 in Detroit and 7.9 percent at Local 896 Los Angeles. At Local 1791 in Montreal, only 0.71 percent of the membership voted—O'Brien won the local by 5 votes to 4.

Workers showed indifference to the election even on the Teamsters United candidates' home turf. At Local 25 in Boston, of which O'Brien is president, turnout was a mere 32.8 percent. O'Brien's running mate, Fred Zuckerman, is

president of Local 89, which encompasses the massive Worldport in Louisville, Kentucky, an international air hub for UPS. Turnout at Local 89, which has over 15,000 members, was only 18.5 percent. This is all the more significant given that Zuckerman's local is substantially comprised of super-exploited, mostly young warehouse workers at Worldport starting out at only \$13 per hour.

In addition to TDU itself, other pseudo-left groups such as Unite All Workers for Democracy, a similar group in the United Auto Workers, as well as *Labor Notes* and its prominent writer Jonah Furman, have hailed the outcome as a milestone in a supposed decades-long fight to "democratize" the Teamsters union, long infamous for its ties to organized crime and use of open violence against dissidents. While they were transfixed by the Teamsters election outcome, however, they almost totally ignored the trampling of the democratic rights of John Deere workers by the UAW, which shut down their strike on Wednesday by forcing them to vote again under duress for a contract which they had already rejected. In fact, Furman and others even hailed the deal which the UAW had rammed down Deere workers' throats.

This demonstrates that the real orientation of these groups is not to a rank-and-file rebellion against the pro-corporate unions but toward bolstering the credibility of the unions by falsely presenting factional disputes within the bureaucracy as a titanic struggle for "democracy."

No small factor in the low turnout was the thoroughly conventional character of the victorious "opposition" slate, composed of career bureaucrats with no association whatsoever with any opposition program.

O'Brien has been a member of the IBT since 1991 and a member of the union bureaucracy since 1999. In addition to his position as president of Local 25, O'Brien is secretary-treasurer of Joint Council 10 and eastern regional vice president. Since 2019, he has been paid more than \$300,000 per year for holding these positions.

He is also known among Teamster members as a particularly infamous thug and former factional ally of Hoffa. In 2014, during a local election, he publicly threatened TDU-backed candidates with violence, and was briefly suspended as punishment. The decision by the TDU to endorse his candidacy for president understandably produced serious disquiet among its supporters in the rank and file when it was first announced, forcing several months' delay to their formal endorsement.

In 2017, Hoffa tapped O'Brien to lead contract negotiations with UPS. Months later, a rift developed between the two, and Hoffa removed O'Brien as negotiator. O'Brien took advantage of this rift to further his ambitions and set the stage for his run for IBT president. The following year, workers ultimately voted down the rotten UPS contract, but Hoffa cited an obscure and anti-democratic clause in the union's constitution which requires a two-thirds majority to reject a contract if turnout is less than 50 percent to impose it on them. The provision was removed in the most recent Teamsters national convention over the summer; O'Brien made an issue of the UPS contract during the recent campaign to posture.

At the Teamsters convention, the assembled delegates drawn from the union bureaucracy recognized O'Brien as one of their own, with a majority voting to back his candidacy. This is a sharp break from previous conventions, during which TDU-endorsed candidates normally barely meet the 5 percent threshold needed to be put on the ballot in the general election. The tightly managed character of this "democratic" process, in which no candidate can even appear on the ballot without having support from a section of the bureaucracy, testifies to the dead-end character of the program of "reforming" the Teamsters from within.

For the bureaucracy, two inter-related factors motivated their support. The first is a need for a new public face of the union under conditions where decades of betrayals led by the Hoffa administration has badly tattered its image. This is particularly important for them given the union's campaign launched earlier this year to expand its reach at Amazon. Union officials already have visited at least nine Amazon facilities in Canada and filed for union representation votes at locations in Calgary and Nisku, Alberta. The Alberta Labor Relations Board recently denied IBT's application in Calgary.

Clearly the Teamsters took as a warning the debacle of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) campaign to unionize an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, in which barely one-eighth of eligible voters cast ballots in support of the union, an indication of high levels of alienation and indifference toward an organization which did nothing, and could do nothing, to associate its campaign

with any concrete demands for improvements to wages or working conditions.

Second is O'Brien's connections to the Biden administration and the state, which intervened aggressively in support of the RWDSU and is openly promoting the unions as a bulwark against social opposition. As president of Local 25, O'Brien developed a relationship with Democrat Marty Walsh, a former union official who went on to become the city's mayor in 2014 and is now President Joe Biden's secretary of labor.

O'Brien's election, therefore, will facilitate closer connections between the state and the Teamsters union, including its most overtly right-wing layers, as well as with the pseudo-left.

In fact, the federal government has long demonstrated that it considers the institutional stability and credibility of the Teamsters as a critical strategic question. It intervened directly under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act organized crime law in 1989 to remove hundreds of officials with ties to organized crime and force a re-write to the union's constitution to allow for the direct election of the national leadership.

TDU hailed the intervention as a means of restoring rank-and-file control over the union and even took up posts in national leadership after the accession of TDU-backed candidate Ron Carey to the union presidency in the first-ever Teamsters general election. Carey, however, proved to be no more "democratic" than his Mafia-connected predecessors, betrayed the 1997 UPS strike and forced through a deal which established a second tier of lower-paid workers. Carey later was expelled from the IBT for using union money for his re-election campaign.

The real fight for workers' democracy at the Teamsters does not mean supporting one or another faction of the apparatus against another, but the building of an organized rank-and-file rebellion against this entire outmoded, pro-corporate organization. The critical question for workers in the Teamsters union is the building of a network of rank-and-file committees to fight the union's betrayals and link up their struggles with those of workers across the country and the world.



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