

What is Teamsters for a Democratic Union?

Tom Mackaman
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After years of stagnating wages and sweatshop conditions on the roads and in the warehouses, rank-and-file UPS workers are intent on using the expiration of their current contract on July 31 to fight the parcel delivery giant, which raked in nearly \$14 billion in profits last year.

There is widespread mood for a strike among the 340,000 UPS workers, but the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) bureaucracy is doing everything within its power to smother the struggle.

Given the critical nature of package transport to the economy, UPS workers have immense industrial strength within their grasp. The decisive question is whether they will be blocked from realizing this strength by the IBT bureaucracy.

It is urgent that workers act now to prevent a betrayal. This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees at every hub to take the struggle out of the hands of the treacherous IBT leadership, break its information blackout and expand the fight to embrace logistics workers who face the same conditions as those at UPS—at the United States Postal Service, Federal Express, Amazon, on the railroads, on the docks and in trucking—along with other sections of the working class in the US and internationally.

UPS workers' enemies are making their own preparations. The Biden administration's intervention to block the strike of 120,000 railroaders last winter, under the aegis of the Railway Labor Act, must be taken as a warning. Biden will again be prepared to intervene in the event of a UPS strike, including imposing a Taft-Hartley back-to-work injunction.

But the Biden administration much prefers to lean on its loyal allies who run the IBT, starting with Sean O'Brien, elected in 2021 as the union president. O'Brien, a close associate of former Labor Secretary Marty Walsh, has already played this role. He attended seven White House meetings in 2022, six of which took place concurrently with Biden's intervention to prevent the railroad strike. Two of the rail unions are IBT subsidiaries—the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) and the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED).

O'Brien has provided no credible accounting of his role in scuttling the railroaders' strike, but anyone familiar with his history could hardly have been surprised. A longtime member of the James P. Hoffa faction of the IBT bureaucracy, Teamsters Power, O'Brien had a falling out with his mentor in 2017. Distancing himself from his richly deserved reputation for corruption and thuggery, O'Brien reinvented himself, implausibly, as a "union reformer." Rank-and-file workers were not sold on the facelift. He won election to his office in 2021 with the lowest Teamsters' vote in its history. Of 1.3 million Teamsters in the US and Canada, fewer than 13 percent cast a ballot.

The difficult task of repackaging O'Brien as a reformer and an advocate of union democracy is assigned to an organization called Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). The TDU presents itself to workers as a rank-and-file organization. It is no such thing. It is a paid faction of the bureaucracy, operating within the larger Teamsters United faction, headed up by Fred Zuckerman, president of Teamsters Joint Council 94, which controls the crucial UPS World Hub in Louisville, Kentucky.

In presenting O'Brien as a reformer, the TDU reprises a role it has

played again and again since the 1980s, when it cooperated with then-US Attorney Rudy Giuliani to sweep aside the mob-connected IBT leadership that ruled the union in those years. It was in fact only through its cooperation with the federal government that members of the TDU secured their first major bureaucratic posts in the IBT. From there, the TDU latched onto the candidacy of Ron Carey, a lifelong bureaucrat at a UPS local in New York City, presenting him as a reformer and a servant of the rank and file.

After Carey was caught up in a corruption scandal and removed from office, the TDU moved on to find new patrons in the bureaucracy. And so it has continued, with O'Brien the object of TDU ardor today. The TDU is now openly integrated into the administration of a leading and hated Hoffa thug. UPS workers must be warned: Far from organizing rank-and-file resistance to a contract sellout, the TDU will act as a ruthless defender of the bureaucracy. Its task is to divert rank-and-file opposition behind O'Brien and the Teamsters apparatus.

The TDU is backed in its efforts by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The members of the US Congress who belong to this self-styled "socialist" group supported Biden's ban on the rail strike. It is now heavily involved in trying to block any independent struggle of UPS workers with its bogus "strike ready" campaign, which aims to boost the credibility of both O'Brien and the TDU apparatus. The DSA joins the TDU in seeking to orient workers to the Democratic Party. Both tell UPS workers that the Biden administration will not issue an injunction as it did against the railroaders, and that, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, it can be pressured by workers to come to their side.

Both history and class orientation have brought the DSA and TDU together. The two organizations trace their origins to Max Shachtman, who broke with Leon Trotsky and the international socialist movement before World War II. Shachtman rejected the defense of the world historic achievements won by the working class in the 1917 Russian Revolution, and more generally, the capacity of the working class to rebuild society on far higher, i.e., socialist, foundations.

This led the Shachtmanites to embrace American imperialism during the Korean and Vietnam wars and to integrate themselves into the anti-socialist AFL-CIO bureaucracy. Today, both organizations prop up the AFL-CIO officialdom, and their leading figures back the Biden administration's proxy bloodbath against Russia in Ukraine—a war that drives inflation, is used to justify social austerity and threatens nuclear war.

The TDU hides this from workers, but it does not stop there. The TDU obscures the history of the federal RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations) prosecution that paved the way for its entry into the IBT national bureaucracy. It covers up the histories of those bureaucrats it supports. And it falsifies the history of the last major UPS strike in 1997, presenting it as a complete victory for rank-and-file workers.

Workers need to know this history, because it holds crucial lessons for today's struggles—starting with the one at UPS. The history of the TDU exposes the bankruptcy of a perspective that is still being fobbed off on workers everywhere. That perspective is, first, that the unions can be

reformed and made into instruments of the class struggle by advancing allegedly “progressive” bureaucracies. And second, that workers must be blocked from socialist politics.

The entire history of the TDU demonstrates, above all else, the need for the complete independence of workers from all sections of the bureaucracy and the capitalist political establishment.

The Socialist Equality Party’s call for the building of rank-and-file committees is not just a slogan. Such committees provide a concrete form through which workers can advance their interests. Genuine workplace democracy, including elementary propositions like open discussion of strategy and tactics, is only possible in rank-and-file committees free from the prying eyes of the bureaucracy and its spies. By its very nature the labor bureaucracy opposes further necessary steps, such as worker control on the shop floor and the expansion of struggles to other sections of the working class in the US and internationally.

Real workplace democracy also means rejecting the ban on the discussion of socialism imposed by the labor bureaucracy and supported by the TDU. Not every worker who joins the rank-and-file committee will be a socialist. But the development of the class struggle itself poses the issue of the political struggle for power. This understanding, and the tasks that arise from it, must be brought into the working class by a socialist party rooted in the lessons of the long history of the class struggle and socialism. This is the guiding conception of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The fact that workers’ struggles are also political struggles is not something smuggled into what would otherwise be “pure and simple trade union” issues. It is a reality, proven by the bitter experience of workers around the world over nearly two centuries of history, and more recently in the US, from the Reagan administration’s crushing of the PATCO strike of air traffic controllers in 1981, to Biden’s intervention against the railroaders last year—to the history of the IBT and the TDU itself.

The crisis of the 1970s and the birth of the TDU

By the time the TDU was formed in 1976, the American unions had long been controlled by a nationalist and pro-capitalist apparatus. Union leaders explicitly supported the corporations’ right to profit, whether those leaders were “progressives” like Walter Reuther of the UAW, or “bosses” like Jimmy Hoffa of the IBT.

This perspective, treacherous to workers as it was, did not exclude improving living standards during the period of American economic supremacy that prevailed from the 1940s through the late 1960s, the heyday of the UAW and the IBT. So long as the whole economic pie was growing, capitalists thought it the safer course to share some crumbs with workers. The auto bosses still remembered the insurrectionary sit-down plant occupations of 1936 and 1937, when a question mark was placed over their control of production. As for the executives and shareholders at America’s trucking firms, they could not have forgotten that the long-haul truckers had been organized into the IBT out of the Minneapolis General Strike of 1934, a struggle organized and headed by followers of Leon Trotsky. Indeed, the Russian Revolution itself, which Trotsky and Lenin had led, was still a living memory.

Yet, just as the TDU and similar union reform groups were entering the unions, the ground beneath organized labor was shifting. Over the following decades, the unions would decline and degenerate, and ultimately be transformed into the instruments of the corporations and the state that they are today. The unions’ most basic role within the political economy testifies to this transformation. In the 1960s, in contract negotiations the unions still represented *workers to owners*, seeking to

improve or at least maintain wages and conditions—though always within the constraints of the capitalist market and bourgeois legality. But by the 1980s, in contract negotiations the unions represented *owners to workers*, their mantra, which continues down to the present: “*Accept this bad deal, or else you will lose your job.*”

This transformation was set into motion by changes to global economic production in the 1970s, which put sharp downward pressure on profit rates, and by the decline of American capitalism, which found expression in the erosion of the dollar’s value. Dollar inflation, in turn, compelled workers into struggle. They struck by the millions throughout the 1970s, seeking to keep wages apace with prices. But capitalists, whose profit margins were tightening, were hellbent on driving wages down and rolling back regulations.

Under these altered conditions, the union bureaucracies’ unwavering commitment to the profit rights of “American free enterprise” set the stage for a massive confrontation with the workers they claimed to represent, including at UPS, where in 1973 rank-and-file drivers and warehouse workers in Ohio and Pennsylvania waged a wildcat strike “in open defiance of the threats and sanctions of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters,” as one historian described it.[1]

Rank-and-file workers forced strikes that rocked many industries, including shipping, auto, coal, the postal service and education. Young workers, many of whom had been radicalized by the Vietnam War, fought heroically to make the unions fighting organizations, including in the IBT. But the more the workers fought, the more the unions solidarized themselves with the capitalists.

It was not for want of militancy that the rank-and-file could not overthrow the rotten, treacherous leadership. Workers in the 1970s had lived through the era of improving living standards of the 1950s–1960s. Many still remembered “the hungry 1930s.” But the crisis of the 1970s signified that the era of class compromise was over. It cried out for a clarification of the basic class lines and a struggle to break workers from the capitalist political parties. It was in fact the lack of an international, anti-capitalist perspective which paved the way for a ruling class counteroffensive that, in the US, first took the form of the deregulation of key sectors of the economy, including trucking and transport.

The TDU and similar groups stepped into the breach with the specific intention of *blocking* this political clarification. The TDU bitterly opposed the Workers League—forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party—which fought for socialist consciousness among workers, a perspective that hinged on driving the pro-capitalist bureaucrats out of the unions and wresting workers away from the Democratic Party through the formation of a Labor Party based from the unions. The Workers League won militant workers to its banner in a number of industries. The TDU and the labor reform groups fought to block this, limiting militant workers to supposedly “trade union” issues. In fact, they insisted that there was really only *one* trade union issue: corruption.

Much more was involved in the degeneration of the unions than just the corruption, as widespread as it was and continues to be. In the 1970s, the processes that became known as globalization were undermining the viability of all nationally based workers organizations. Advances in computer, telecommunication and shipping technology had opened up new possibilities in transportation logistics, which could in turn be used for the disaggregation of factory production into far-ranging supply chains.

America’s capitalists saw in these new efficiencies, immensely progressive in their own right, an opportunity to fight their international economic rivals by ramping up exploitation and secure new streams of profit. To achieve these advantages, the rules that had long governed trucking and parcel service had to be changed. Politicians of both parties enlisted into the service of deregulation, the liberal Democratic Senator Edward “Ted” Kennedy of Massachusetts leading the way. Successive

presidential administrations, culminating under President Jimmy Carter, with the implementation of the Motor Carrier Act (MCA) of 1980, targeted regulations and controls over trucking overseen by the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) and the National Master Freight Agreement (NMFA) governing wages and conditions of Teamsters drivers.[2]

The Democrats also spearheaded the deregulation of the airline industry, opening the door for a vicious attack on airline workers. In 1981, Republican President Reagan fired 13,000 air traffic controllers, using a plan drawn up by Carter's transportation secretary. Although this led to one of the largest-ever demonstrations in Washington D.C., the massive Solidarity Day protest of September 19, 1981, and popular support for a general strike to defend the PATCO air traffic controllers, the AFL-CIO blocked any action, paving the way for more than a decade of union-busting and wage cutting attacks overseen by both big business parties.

Like other unions, the number of Teamsters members and the wages of truckers and warehouse workers plummeted. In 1979, there were 1,975,000 dues-paying members of the Teamsters. By 1983, this has fallen to 1,616,000. The IBT went from representing 60 percent of truck drivers before deregulation, to only 25 percent in 2000. Between 1977 and 1987, drivers' real mileage pay rates declined by 44 percent. Workers compensated by working longer hours, compelled to endanger their own safety. Nonetheless, real annual earnings fell by 30 percent between 1977 and 1995. By the late 1990s, real wages in the industry were no better than they had been in the 1950s. These trends have continued. Truckers and delivery drivers today haul more and are paid less than in the 1970s in real terms. Their crucial importance to the economy, which would grind to a halt without them, is rewarded with constantly increasing exploitation.[3]

The IBT not only provided no resistance to this offensive. It conspired with the corporations against the workers it claimed to represent. In crucial negotiations in 1982 and 1983, it agreed to both a three-year wage freeze for long-haul truckers and a two-tier wage system. Afterwards, the IBT abandoned industry-wide contracts, instead determining its bargaining position based on the alleged financial health of the firm. Distressed trucking and shipment businesses were given sweet concessionary contracts in exchange for company stock (Employee Stock Ownership Plans, or ESOPs), deals which never exceeded 49 percent ownership for the workers. Commented Norman Weintraub, Director of Research for the Teamsters, "Companies that are not in trouble do not want to share ownership." In other words, the IBT traded away wages and hours for junk stock.[4]

America's truckers and parcel workers were under political attack—by the corporations, the politicians and "their own" union. But the TDU, which by 1979 had drawn together several other Teamster reform groups—including a health and safety-focused organization called PROD, or the Professional Drivers Council, founded with the backing of consumer rights activist Ralph Nader in 1971[5]—insisted on excluding political clarification from workplace struggles. The result was that it disarmed workers before capital's offensive.

The politics of the TDU

The conception that politics is not for workers had its own history. The initial members of the TDU, founded in 1976, were middle class youth sent into the Teamsters union by an organization called the International Socialists (IS), which had emerged in 1962 out of the Socialist Party of America, led by Shachtman, a former American Trotskyist who moved sharply to right after breaking with the Fourth International in 1940.

The IS was centered on college campuses, especially at the University of

California, Berkeley, where Ken Paff, one of the founders of the TDU and its national organizer until 2021, was a student, and where the leading figure of the IS, Hal Draper, worked. Draper imagined his tactic of entering the unions unique in world history. "No Marxist group has ever carried on any systematic revolutionary work in the trade unions," he ignorantly declared.[6] In fact, Marxists (beginning with Karl Marx!) have carried out work in the unions. But Marxists have done so to elevate workers' consciousness of the class struggle.

The TDU was only one of several efforts in the 1970s that, coming in response to the massive rank-and-file upsurge of the decade, aimed to funnel worker anger behind allegedly "progressive" bureaucrats. These tendencies coalesced around a publication called *Labor Notes*, founded by IS members Kim Moody, Jane Slaughter and Jim West in 1979. The various union reform groups included Miners for Democracy in the United Mine Workers of America, Steelworkers Fightback in the United Steelworkers, and, somewhat later, the New Directions movement in the United Auto Workers. The involvement of the IS and other middle class groupings varied in each union. It was strongest inside the Teamsters.[7]

The TDU won a certain following among the rank and file, claiming perhaps 8,000 worker-members at its peak. At times, TDU members showed physical courage. In one case, Pete Camarata (1946–2014), a Detroit warehouse worker, was beaten nearly to death after criticizing union President Frank Fitzsimmons at the Teamsters national convention in Las Vegas in 1976. In 1983, a group created specifically to intimidate union dissidents, the Brotherhood of Loyal Americans and Strong Teamsters (BLAST), attacked a TDU meeting in Cleveland, taking over the podium, ripping down banners and running TDU members out of the building. According to government records, the BLAST attackers in Cleveland included "the presidents of two Teamsters locals, a local vice president, two secretary-treasurers, three union trustees, one organizer and at least 10 business agents for the international union." [8]

The problem was not lack of courage among individuals like Camarata, a worker brought up through Jimmy Hoffa's old Detroit Local 299. The problem was the perspective of the IS, which dominated the Teamster reform movement. The orientation of the TDU is now, and has always been, to the bureaucracy, never the working class—all the rhetoric about rank-and-file power notwithstanding.

The IS operated from the perspective that workers were hopelessly backward, and that the most that could be achieved would be to pressure allegedly progressive sections of the union bureaucracy to the left, so that "space" for its members might one day be created. Until that time, IS members in the TDU would keep their political ideas to themselves. This political impressionism was formed out of the belief that American workers could never be won to a socialist perspective. As *Labor Notes* founder Kim Moody put it:

The fact that the vast majority of working people lack even a consistently class-conscious way of looking at the world makes it difficult for socialism to get a hearing. The gaping lack in the US at this time is the lack of a sea of class-conscious workers for socialist ideas and organizations to swim in. How do we help create that sea? Socialists can build transitional organizations and struggles that help to raise the class consciousness of activist workers.

This "rank and file strategy," he added, "starts with the experience, struggles and consciousness of workers as they are today, but offers a bridge to deeper class consciousness and socialist politics." [9] According to Dan La Botz, a founding member of the TDU, only through such struggle would workers "become open not only to more militant action

[but] the fight for democracy in their unions,” and then ultimately “also to socialist ideas.”[10]

As it turned out, the IS “bridge” to “transitional politics” was a very long way off indeed. As La Botz put it, the “decline in the social movements of the 1960s and ’70s ... meant building of an American revolutionary socialist party *was postponed for at least another generation*” (emphasis added). Accordingly, the middle-class youth sent into the unions were not to fight for socialism but “union democracy”—the only issue the TDU leaders thought workers could understand or would accept.

In reality, the banishment of politics meant the exclusion of *socialist* politics and the continued political subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party and capitalism. From the beginning, La Botz admitted, there “was always the fear that an emphasis on socialism might drive away Teamster activists.” The solution? IS members hid their politics from workers—even as they more and more embraced the Democratic Party. They only discussed “their socialist convictions and their IS membership with their closest collaborators, if only to insure that Teamster rank-and-filers would not be taken by surprise” if IS members were outed by hostile bureaucrats.

In any case, whatever ideas IS activists may have had about raising class consciousness were quickly discarded. As La Botz explains:

Within the TDU, the IS soon abandoned virtually all efforts at socialist propaganda and gave up attempts to recruit new members to socialism... The IS leaders in TDU therefore lowered their expectations and focused on maintaining TDU as a militant pole of attraction within the IBT... The result was a certain shift in TDU activity, from a focus on workers’ struggles against the employer at the local level to an emphasis on national contract campaigns, organizing within the union around democratic issues, and elections for local office...

Toward its long-term goal of making space for itself within the Teamsters, the TDU created a national newspaper, hired Paff as a full-time organizer, and procured a Washington D.C. national office. Through such means, “TDU members were elected local leaders in a variety of unions, from Denver to Atlanta.”[11]

Behind the TDU’s deceitfulness was not a fear of supposedly right-wing workers, but of alienating sections of the anticommunist trade union bureaucracy, with whom the TDU hoped to collaborate. Even in the 1970s, in the midst of the last great strike wave in US history, the IS equated the anticommunism of the union bureaucrats—which was rooted in the defense of their privileged positions within the capitalist system—with that of the workers, who, whatever their political confusion, were objectively being driven into a struggle against the profit system and the two corporate-controlled parties that defended it.

Indeed, Moody and the other IS ex-radicals could not imagine any serious political struggle *outside* of the national labor bureaucracies. “[I]n their size and critical location in production, the unions remain the central organized expression of the day-to-day class conflict,” Moody wrote. “Attempts to leap over them to the ‘political’ [will result in] marginalization.” Those who would seek to explain the class nature of labor struggles are seriously misguided, in Moody’s view:

It has been argued again and again, workers should be drawn into “political” struggles, which, it is claimed, will create the broader consciousness on which the fight for fundamental social change can be built... The choice of just what is sufficiently

“political” to properly transform consciousness is invariably pre-empted by some self-appointed group... Clearly, politics has not proved a remedy to uneven or conservative consciousness any more than wage or workplace struggles.

With this outlook in mind *Labor Notes* set about identifying and cultivating sections of the bureaucracy with which it hoped to work. In the 1980s and 1990s *Labor Notes* produced several how-to manuals for union reform and held numerous conferences and workshops in which these supposedly “practical” and “trade union” issues were elaborated. Socialism was excluded from the discussions.

The prohibition of socialism from their agitation turned out to mean also the banishment of it from their own heads. TDU and *Labor Notes* always refused analysis of the root causes for the reactionary leadership that dominated the AFL-CIO unions in the 1970s and 1980s. The union reformers could never face up to developments in the class struggle that objectively undermined their own nationalist perspective. As late as 2001, for example, Moody heaped scorn on the significance of globalization, calling it “Globaloney.” Developments in technology and communication had not really changed anything. After all, he explained, “most things, including the production and consumption of most goods and services, still occur at the national level.”[20]

It must be plainly stated: The balance sheet for TDU, *Labor Notes* and other union reform efforts is catastrophic—if success is measured by results for workers. In major industries with these so-called reformers played significant or leading roles—trucking, coal, steel, auto, telecommunications and public transit—millions of jobs have been lost since the 1970s, and wages, benefits and worker safety have been rolled back decades.

All the manuals, books and conferences did nothing to change the trajectory of the IBT, the UAW or the AFL-CIO. This is because the role of the unions in the broader political economy was, and is, determined not by the personal characteristics of individual bureaucrats, but by the historically conditioned nature of the organizations.

Where does union corruption come from?

Unprincipled politics makes for strange bedfellows. With the failure of their reform perspective, the TDU ran headlong into the arms of the Reagan-Bush administration, which targeted the IBT in 1988 under the anti-democratic Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO). The case was prosecuted by then-US attorney for the southern district of New York, Rudolph Giuliani.

The TDU had campaigned for federal intervention in the IBT throughout the 1980s. By 1987, Paff was appealing directly to the US Attorney General Edwin Meese, writing, “There is only one ‘reorganization’ under RICO that the government can effectively undertake: namely to direct the IBT to hold rank and file elections under government supervision for all International Officers.”[13] A legal counsel to the TDU, Michael Goldberg, later acknowledged that the TDU had cooperated intimately with the federal investigation headed by Giuliani “before a settlement was reached.”[14]

The result was an intervention unprecedented in the history of American labor. Hundreds of Teamsters officials were ultimately dismissed from their posts by government-appointed trustees. The Consent Decree the IBT signed with the federal government in 1989, to prevent criminal prosecution, established an Independent Review Board (IRB) and an entire investigative office controlled by corporate attorneys and funded by millions of dollars in union dues. Among its prominent members was

William H. Webster, former director of the FBI and CIA, appointed in 1992.[15]

The IRB had the authority to promulgate rules for the IBT, supposedly designed to root out corruption. It could kick out any member for “conduct unbecoming to the union,” including for defying IRB edicts. This office was ready to tip the balance in favor of whichever faction of the bureaucracy it viewed most malleable to state interests.[16] The TDU leadership was aware that its own fate depended on this interest, campaigning against the efforts of Jimmy Hoffa’s son, James P. Hoffa, to cast it off. In a 2018 article posted on the TDU website, the organization complained that Hoffa’s bureaucratic faction “has sought for years to hamstring or eliminate the IRB and its corruption investigations [which] has functioned for 24 years to root out corrupt Teamster officials.”[17]

Leaders of the TDU—some of whom secured posts vacated by the federal housecleaning—welcomed state intervention in the Teamsters because, they claimed, the constitutional reforms imposed by the federal administrators mirrored their longtime demands. In the unintentionally ironic words of one Chicago TDU activist, “the story of [Teamster] democratic transformation began with the trusteeship.”[18]

How the “democratization of union institutions and practices”—in the words of another former TDU activist [19]—could be imposed by the federal government has never been explained. Nor has the TDU explained the preposterous notion that the Reagan-Bush administration would act in the name of “union democracy” and on behalf of Teamster workers—the same administration that had “smashed the PATCO air traffic controllers, jailed scores of militant workers and spearheaded the biggest union-busting drive in half a century.”[20]

The federal government’s move against the IBT was not motivated by concerns over union democracy. It was driven by the fear that the nation’s largest union could collapse and cease its role in containing working class struggle in a key sector of the economy. The end result of its intervention was the consolidation of state and corporate influence over the IBT.

As the *Bulletin*, the American forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, warned as early as 1981:

The TDU itself cannot provide the alternative leadership that is required in the Teamsters, because it does not come to grips with the central political issues, reducing the struggle for leadership within the union to the question of corruption. The bankruptcy of this outlook is expressed in the fact that TDU opposes corruption on the basis of a demand for government investigations, when the capitalist state is itself the main source of the corruption. The government pursues such investigations not in order to “clean up” the unions, but to weaken them. The corruption flows from the right-wing political orientation of the Teamsters bureaucracy to defending capitalism and the capitalist state, not the other way around.[21]

The *Bulletin* was correct. The right-wing, pro-capitalist evolution of the Teamsters only accelerated after the disappearance (and presumed murder) of Jimmy Hoffa in 1975[34]—the year before the founding of the TDU. Under Hoffa’s successors, Fitzsimmons, Roy Williams, Jackie Presser and Billy McCarthy, organized crime’s influence over the Teamsters, which attracted great media attention, also deepened. IBT bureaucrats paid themselves hundreds of thousands of dollars, and even controlled four private jets for “official travel.”

The racketeers’ place in the IBT was preserved, right through the 1980s, when Teamsters officials ensured that their members crossed the picket lines in strike after strike.[22] In that decade, Teamsters presidents that were known to have connections to organized crime won the active

support of both major parties as well as presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.[23] In 1981, as the Reagan administration prepared to crush the PATCO strike—a watershed defeat in the history of American labor—Reagan sent videotaped condolences to the Teamsters annual convention, praising the recently deceased union President Fitzsimmons, a known racketeer. “As I have said previously, Frank won the respect of both business and political leaders as an affable but hard bargainer,” Reagan said. “He also won friendships, including my own.”[24] Reagan and Bush maintained that “friendship” with Jackie Presser, who worked simultaneously with Cleveland organized crime and as an informant for the FBI, which protected him while he plundered the Teamsters to the tune of millions.[25]

However, as the *Bulletin* explained, the power of the racketeers in the union was rooted in the IBT’s historic rejection of socialist politics, and was in fact accepted and at times encouraged by the federal government.

This can be traced as far back as 1941. In that year the young Jimmy Hoffa was dispatched from Detroit with a gang of toughs by longtime union President Daniel Tobin to break up the Trotskyist leadership of Minneapolis Local 544, which under socialists Farrell Dobbs, Carl Skoglund and the Dunne brothers (Vincent, Miles and Grant) had waged a successful general strike in 1934 that, in turn, had led to the rapid growth of the IBT among long-haul truckers throughout the Midwest. Tobin cooperated intimately with the Roosevelt administration, which was about to launch the Smith Act trials against Dobbs along with the rest of the Trotskyist leadership in preparation for US entry into World War II.[26]

Hoffa admitted that he had learned how to organize under Dobbs and the Dunnes, and always remembered them as friends. “Farrell Dobbs was a crackerjack organizer [and] a brilliant strategist,” Hoffa later recalled in his 1970 autobiography. “Dobbs also saw the unions as a great potential political force. I could not agree with him then, nor do I now.”[27]

In turning on Dobbs, and against socialism, Hoffa was charting his future course in the IBT as a ruthless opportunist ready to lean on underworld elements to strengthen his power. He could not understand that Dobbs’ strategy grew from the political perspective of international socialism. It was this that allowed Dobbs to perceive the strategic value of organizing the long-haul drivers, on whom Tobin and the rest of the old AFL had looked down as “the riff raff.” In fact, what Minneapolis, 1934, demonstrated—a fact lost on the TDU—was that an avowedly socialist leadership could lead workers in struggle and win.[28]

It was not a lesson lost on the federal government, however. Beginning with the Smith Act persecution of the Trotskyists inside the Teamsters and continuing for a half-century, Washington tacitly accepted organized crime in the IBT, even if it occasionally mounted high-publicity hearings and investigations, most notably Robert Kennedy’s decade-long campaign to put Hoffa behind bars. Robert Kennedy’s aim was not to restore union democracy, but to weaken the grip of the union in this strategic area of the economy—the same aim that motivated his brother, Ted Kennedy’s deregulation of the economy in the 1970s.

Giuliani’s RICO investigation, supported by the TDU, represented a qualitative development in state control over the American unions. It has, moreover, provided a model for subsequent federal interventions in the unions, most notably this year’s federally supervised election for the presidency of the UAW, in which another allegedly “reform” bureaucrat, Shawn Fain, was ushered into office. Much like Ron Carey, Fain is celebrated by the pseudo-left as though he will transform the UAW into a fighting organization. But in his short time in office, Fain has already attempted to isolate and strangle a critical strike among UAW parts workers.

According to liberal thought, independent trade unions are a hallmark of a functioning democratic society. Perhaps for this reason, legal scholars worried over the precedent established by the consent decree signed by the Teamsters. Was the IBT any longer a genuinely independent union? How

was it different from unions openly controlled by authoritarian regimes?[29]

In fact, the state intervention in the IBT is only one transparent example of a tendency in the historical development of the trade unions noted by Leon Trotsky in one of his final writings— “their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power.”

“Monopoly capitalism does not rest on competition and free private initiative but on centralized command,” Trotsky explained in 1940. “The capitalist cliques at the head of mighty trusts, syndicates, banking consortiums, etc., view economic life from the very same heights as does state power; and they require at every step the collaboration of the latter... By transforming the trade unions into organs of the state, fascism invents nothing new; it merely draws to their ultimate conclusion the tendencies inherent in imperialism.”[30]

Trotsky concluded this article, which was found on his desk after his murder by a Stalinist assassin, by insisting that genuinely democratic and independent trade unions could “be assured only by a completely revolutionary leadership.” Trotsky predicted that in the epoch of imperialist decay the unions ultimately would either serve as the instruments of class exploitation, or as the organs of working-class revolution. There could be no middle ground.

The evolution of the Teamsters proves Trotsky’s point in the negative. It long ago ceased to represent workers. It is an organization that seeks to represent the major corporations and the state, and that survives at their mercy.

The TDU has evolved as well. The bankruptcy of its effort to reform the Teamsters was exposed with its open embrace of state intervention in 1988 and its subsequent integration with the Carey wing of the bureaucracy.

Ron Carey and the transformation of the TDU

Political consequences flowed from the TDU’s subordination to Giuliani’s RICO investigation. With the government trusteeship as the mechanism, the TDU began to reconstitute itself as a faction within the IBT bureaucracy—a bureaucracy that has proven itself more hostile than ever to rank-and-file workers. The TDU’s newfound success in the early 1990s—widely celebrated by the entire pseudo-left milieu—was not based on a movement of the rank-and-file, as it had claimed was its goal, but on the largesse of the capitalist state.

The TDU’s big post-RICO break came in the first government-supervised IBT election, in 1991, when it joined with powerful interests backing Ron Carey for union president. As La Botz admits, “the TDU’s national organization functioned as Ron Carey’s campaign organization.”[31] Carey’s victory, which also resulted in the promotion of several TDU members to the union’s executive board and many others to lesser bureaucratic posts, was greeted with rapture by the capitalist media, including the *New York Times*, which saw in Carey “A new legend for the rank and file,” “a triumph of union democracy over organized crime,” “an honest, straightforward leader,” “a firebrand,” “a real outsider,” “a Frank Capra—Mr. Smith Goes to Washington’ figure,” “a gift to his members.”[32]

To this day, the TDU presents Carey’s win as the culmination of a democratic groundswell. It was no such thing. Carey won 48 percent of the votes, but only 28 percent of Teamsters bothered to cast a ballot. As a share of overall membership, he took only 15 percent. Internal polls before the vote showed that most Teamsters had no idea who Carey or the other major candidates were.[33]

It was probably better for the TDU that Carey was unknown. There was

nothing about the Reagan-supporting anti-communist from Long Island to suggest that he would remake the Teamsters into a democratic organization.

Carey was never any friend of the rank-and-file. In his 23 years at the helm of UPS Teamsters Local 804 he “was something of a pioneer within the labor bureaucracy in the imposition of concessions and the establishment of corporatist relations with management.” His most notable achievement was the betrayal of an 85-day strike against UPS in 1974, in which he accepted “the contract that opened the floodgates for the destruction of full-time jobs and the spread of lower-paid part-time labor at the trucking company’s operations across the country.”[34]

During a decades-long career as an IBT bureaucrat in New York, Carey kept “stumbling into associations” with the city’s powerful Mafia syndicates. While Carey was IBT president in New York, the Lucchese family took control of “Local 295, the JFK airport local, made infamous in Martin Scorsese’s *Goodfellas*.” At Carey’s home UPS local 804 the DeCavalcante syndicate ran the Local’s dental plan and plundered the pension fund for loan racketeering. “At the behest of the mob,” according to one account, “Local 804 broke strikes, offered employers sweetheart contracts, and arranged for mob-connected companies to get contracts with UPS.” In the late 1980s, when his most immediate underlings were caught up in a widening federal investigation, once again headed by Giuliani, Carey expressed shock. Carey, whose own brother Carlyle married into the Gambino family and became its “contact person” with the Teamsters, testified against his subordinates—but only after Giuliani offered him immunity from prosecution.

His TDU apologists have always pretended that Carey knew nothing of the Mafia saturation of New York IBT locals under his jurisdiction, and that, in any case, he himself did not benefit from these relations. They portray Carey as an honest man who never earned more as a union official than a senior UPS driver. Yet by the time Carey became president he had somehow become a real estate millionaire, holding numerous properties (in his wife’s name) including homes in Kew Gardens and Jamaica Hills in Queens, two oceanfront condos in Florida, a home in New Jersey, a condo in Virginia, and a condo in Scottsdale, Arizona. Even more mysteriously, Carey’s father died in 1992 with \$2.1 million in UPS stock.[35]

So why did the TDU latch onto Carey? In his book *Solidarity for Sale* the late labor journalist Robert Fitch provides a highly revealing account—all the more credible because Fitch had earlier been an enthusiastic supporter of the TDU.[36] Fitch reviewed internal TDU archives and carried out interviews with leaders, including Paff. He concluded that the TDU first turned to Carey because they had no place left to run. Afterwards the TDU became dependent on the Carey faction of the IBT bureaucracy. Fitch writes:

For the young progressives of the 1960s who had gone into the labor movement to change the world, Ron Carey was their last, best shot... They’d had their moments, but at the twilight of the Reagan years the TDU wasn’t growing. [Then] Carey, in the 1990s ... started hiring members of TDU—and lots of other former radicals. The more he hired, the more they believed. To question Carey’s credentials was to deny their hopes and threaten their mortgages.

By the end of the 1990s, “the TDU had become part of the Teamster patronage system,” Fitch concludes. “They were Carey clients.”[37]

When speaking frankly among themselves, TDU officials admitted as much. In a confidential memo, entitled “What We’ve Done and Where We’re Going,” Paff conceded that supporting Carey would mean

distancing the TDU from former tactics, such as helping bring workers' grievances to light. "We will likely find members complaining that the IB leadership hasn't solved their problems," he explained, but "very clearly that kind of criticism points in a negative direction." Paff rationalized his organization's support for Carey thusly: "If we had not backed Carey, TDU would have become irrelevant." In fact, it was precisely through its support of Carey that the TDU became irrelevant, at least in the sense that it could no longer be distinguished from the bureaucracy that it once criticized.[38]

As it integrated itself with the Carey faction of the bureaucracy, the TDU suppressed criticism and thereby came into conflict with what remained of its genuine working class membership. For example, in 1993 Pete Camarata—the worker who had been beaten up in Las Vegas by Teamster goons—wrote to Paff and TDU leadership that "Carey's score on limiting corruption" was "zero." Camarata complained specifically that in his Detroit local, Carey had put a former member of BLAST in charge. The same year, concrete truck driver Lee Olson of New York City Local 282 complained at the TDU national convention that Carey had simply replaced one batch of mobsters with another. He demanded to know, "when—if ever—is TDU going to speak out?"[39]

The answer was never. TDU and its supporters have been compelled to obscure and even falsify history, continuing to portray Carey, in Fitch's apt description, as the "St. Sebastian of organized labor."

Anyone who doubts that the TDU and its parent, Teamsters United, will behave any differently than any other faction of the Teamsters bureaucracy should consider the fate of Local 138, which represented warehouse workers and drivers at grocery chains Key Foods, White Rose, and Waldbaum's in New York. Once one of the oldest IBT unions, the local no longer exists.

It was at Local 138 that the TDU had its first significant breakthrough against mob control. In a 1986 election—facilitated again by court intervention—a slate called New Beginnings supplanted the old union officials connected to the Colombo crime syndicate, though with only one-third of the local voting. Six of the seven-person New Beginnings slate were members of the TDU. But in "their very-first postelection meeting" the new leadership divided up the old rackets, court records later revealed. The TDU-backed slate, once in office, continued taking kickbacks from bosses to hire non-union workers, while raiding the local's strike fund. Several members of New Beginnings, including its leader John Georgopoulos, ultimately served federal jail terms for accepting bribes from employers.

Yet it was actually Carey and the International union that destroyed Local 138. In 1998, Teamsters at the White Rose grocery went on strike against the chain's new owner, Arthur M. Goldberg, who had demanded a pay freeze and the introduction of insurance co-payments. IBT Local 97, in New Jersey, worked out a deal with Goldberg, taking the jobs of Local 138 workers for \$11 per hour, \$7 less than the \$18 the strikers were paid. Some 500 New York workers lost their jobs. Ron Carey signed off on the scabbing operation. As Fitch wrote:

Even for the Teamsters, it was an extraordinary sell-out. Generally, only non-union workers take union members' jobs. More rarely, it happens with members of different AFL-CIO unions. But members of the same international union? Why even have a union if one local scabs on the strike of another—which is exactly what Carey permitted by authorizing the New Jersey workers to do the work of the New York strikers for 60 percent of their pay?

At the time the White Rose workers were sold out, not only did TDU

control the local union, it boasted seven members on Carey's international executive board. The former radicals made no public protest. The TDU's newspaper, *Convoy Dispatch*, "always vigilant at spotting sellouts by the Old Guard, barely even managed to notice what happened, much less to call for strong countermeasures," Fitch noted.

The destruction of Local 138 set off a wave of competition among New York and New Jersey IBT locals in offering up cost-cutting to the city's warehouse owners. Wages plummeted across the city, and Teamsters membership fell by one-third, from 33,000 to 22,600.

When asked about the destruction of Local 138, Paff answered in words that might just as well have come from the lips of Jimmy Hoffa: "I say—so fucking what. All sorts of things happen in a movement." [40]

The afterlife of the TDU

In office, Carey signed several concessionary contracts with major firms, including UPS. He isolated and betrayed strikes of Teamsters at major Detroit and Pittsburgh newspapers, while promoting the use of demoralizing middle-class consumer protest tactics. As Carey continued the assault on Teamsters' pay and conditions, the TDU took on an increasingly propagandistic role on behalf of the IBT bureaucracy. Consider, for examples, its claims that the 1994 long-haul truckers' strike and the 1997 UPS strike were smashing victories.

The 1994 strike, which lasted for 23 days and involved 70,000 drivers, was in fact waged as a conscious effort to demoralize truckers in order to force a bitter contract on them largely dictated by Trucking Management, Inc.—which had bargained on behalf of 300 companies in 1979 but which represented only 23 in 1994. Carey's apologists claim that he "won" by negotiating a reduction in part-time workers. Instead, the contract allowed for the hiving off of truck traffic to freight trains and the use of a new category of "casual workers" hired on a per-day basis and paid significantly less than full-time workers. The contract included no amnesty for some 200 Teamsters and supporters arrested on picket lines. But perhaps its most damning feature was a no-strike clause for the life of the four-year contract in favor of settlement by "independent" arbiters—thereby relinquishing the only method workers had to counter the power of the trucking firms.[41]

The TDU has often repeated the claim that the 1997 UPS strike, which involved 185,000 workers, was a total victory.[42] In fact, Carey pulled the plug on the two-week strike with largely symbolic concessions in his pocket—"so modest as to be almost undetectable" in the words of one labor reporter[43]—including the supposed creation of 10,000 full-time jobs over the life of the contract. But these new jobs would be paid 24 percent less than others of the same category—the first ever contract to expand the two-tier system to full-time workers. And the additional jobs were more than offset by the union accepting the right of UPS to lay off as many as 15,000 strikers—to account for business lost to FedEx—including several dozen workers fired for actions during the strike itself. Promises of converting part-time jobs to full-time went unfulfilled.[44]

Both strikes followed a similar pattern. They were called to vent worker opposition to the erosion of wages and conditions, but the strikers were left isolated while business was moved to competitors. Workers were presented with concessionary contracts declared by the IBT and the TDU to be victories.

In assessing Ron Carey's period as Teamsters president, TDU co-founder Dan La Botz writes, "Carey, still supported by the TDU reform movement, pushed democratic changes in the union, organized campaigns for improved contracts, and moved the union from backing Republicans to support for the Democratic Party." [45]

In reality, the “democratic changes” were imposed by the federal government, and the “campaigns for improved contracts” revolved around middle-class public relations stunts. The only truthful part of La Botz’s statement is that Carey realigned the IBT behind the Democratic Party “still supported by the TDU.” Thus, the Berkeley socialists of the IS had made their way not only onto the bureaucratic gravy train, but into the orbit of the oldest capitalist political party on the planet. This entailed a final rejection of not only socialism, but any pretense of opposition to the policies of the American ruling class that were devastating workers. In a damning self-indictment, La Botz writes:

The TDU continued to be narrowly focused on Teamsters’ economic issues and questions of union democracy. TDU’s newspaper *Convoy* seldom commented on other social movements and virtually never mentioned other unions. TDU conventions did not take up questions such as the wars in Kosovo, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq.[45]

La Botz, it should be noted, is among the most vociferous ex-left backers of the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

It turned out that the IBT’s move into the Democratic Party’s column of the two-party system would be the undoing of Ron Carey. Carey won a narrow election victory over James P. Hoffa in the 1996 IBT election, but the next year the results were invalidated when it came to light that his closest advisors—supposedly without his knowledge—had been involved in a complex money-laundering scheme that implicated leading figures in the AFL-CIO, including then-Secretary Treasurer Richard Trumka, and the president of the Service Employees International Union, Andrew Stern. Also involved were several liberal activist groups, Democratic Senators Bob Kerrey of Nebraska and Dianne Feinstein of California, as well as the Clinton-controlled Democratic National Committee. In a classic kickback scheme, Democratic Party-aligned groups were sent \$885,000 in donations from the Teamsters treasury, and in turn made or arranged for reciprocal contributions to the Carey campaign, keeping a share of the cash as spoils of the operation.[46]

In 1998 Carey was expelled from the Teamsters, and his TDU-backed lieutenant, Tom Leedham, lost the election to Hoffa the same year. Carey was banned for life from the IBT. Represented pro bono by corporate white collar defense attorney Reid Weingarten, Carey was acquitted in 2001. The defense did not deny that the Carey faction had conspired with the DNC and others in the kickback operation. It only claimed that it had not been proven that Carey had any knowledge of it.

The revelations of Carey’s corruption discredited the TDU’s promotion of an allegedly “reform” wing of the IBT. But instead of acknowledging this, the TDU belatedly denounced “government intervention” in the Teamsters, decrying the very structures that had paved the way for Carey’s victory—and its members’ own promotion into the ranks of the union bureaucracy. By 1997 and the end of Carey’s tenure, TDU members had secured dozens of paid positions in IBT staff in Washington D.C., as well as securing positions with numerous locals.[47]

After Carey was dismissed from the union, the TDU deepened its embrace of the allegedly “reform” wing of the Teamsters bureaucracy, finding its new patron Zuckerman and his Teamsters United faction. There is at this point nothing to distinguish the TDU from the TU, besides the extra “D” in the acronym and a bit more militant-sounding talk from the former. If there are any differences, the TDU keeps them carefully hidden. It enthusiastically supports TU candidates for president, including O’Brien, and it covers up their betrayals and sellouts.

For a more recent example of the TDU’s treacherous role, UPS workers have to look no farther back than the last national contract settlement in

2018. Workers had voted by a margin of 93 percent to authorize a strike when the old contract expired on July 31, that year. Then they voted down by a margin of 54 percent to 46 percent the sellout contract pushed by the IBT, then headed by James P. Hoffa, who then seized on an obscure rule to push the contract through because turnout had been slightly less than 50 percent.

The TDU and the TU had argued that a “no” vote would convince Hoffa to lead a strike. After Hoffa rammed the contract through, the TDU turned its attention to a toothless petition drive for an emergency meeting to “resolve this crisis,” and for Hoffa to remove the lead negotiator, “return to the bargaining table, and order a contract vote once a new offer has been reached.” The TDU quickly dropped this stunt and then turned to its favorite sort of campaign, trying to get its bureaucratic patrons elected to office. This was achieved with the victory of Hoffa’s erstwhile ally, and now TU leader, Sean O’Brien in the 2021 elections.

The way forward: The Rank-and-File Committee

The TDU’s transformation into a faction of the bureaucracy holds important lessons for workers, but the fundamental issue comes down to this: Can the trade unions, the IBT included—beholden to the Democratic Party and subservient to the corporations’ profit drive—be used to advance the interests of workers?

Or must workers reject the profit demands of the capitalists and the politicians, and take the fight into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees—first with their co-workers in their own workplaces, then across industries and finally across national boundaries?

As for the first option, the working class now has a long experience with “union reformers” and their promises that the existing unions are the only legitimate means of struggle. All of labor history is littered with “militants” and “radicals” that have become bureaucratic sellouts. In this, the TDU invented nothing new. What is peculiar about the TDU is its origins in the middle-class left and its highly conscious attempt to block militant workers from socialism. This has made its metamorphosis particularly farcical. Today, the TDU, along with the DSA and the entire pseudo-left milieu, no longer even *pretend* that the unions need to be reformed. They present pro-capitalist, career strike-breaking bureaucrats, like Sean O’Brien in the IBT and Shawn Fain in the UAW, as militant working class heroes.

While the TDU, the TU and the DSA try to steer workers behind the O’Briens and Fains and the Democratic Party, workers are forming rank-and-file committees in several countries and industries, including in auto, rail, postal delivery and education. They are linked in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which allows for international coordination to confront global capitalism. It is high time for UPS workers to follow suit.

The fact that every class struggle is a political struggle is not an invention of the Marxists, it is a reality. Socialism, guided by the International Committee of the Fourth International, is crucial in the coming struggles. Socialism explains that workers are united, objectively, in the production of goods and services, and that the central task is to make this objective reality, and the tasks flowing from it, consciously understood. More than that, socialism embodies the entire strategic history of the working class, including its experiences with the TDU and the Teamsters.

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[6] Fitch, Robert. *Solidarity for Sale: How Corruption Destroyed the Labor Movement and Undermined America's Promise*. 1st ed. New York: Public Affairs, 2006: 258.

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[9] Moody, Kim "The Rank and File Strategy." Accessed June 5, 2023. <https://jacobin.com/2018/08/unions-socialists-rank-and-file-strategy-kim-moody>.

[10] La Botz, Dan. "The Tumultuous Teamsters of the 1970s," *Rebel Rank and File*: 213–221.

[11] *Ibid*. One faction of the IS opposed the total eclipse of socialist politics. They were expelled in 1977 and eventually formed the (now defunct) International Socialist Organization. A second group opposed TDU members running for union office and becoming bureaucrats. That group quit the IS in 1978 and formed Workers Power, but they later grouped with castaways from the Socialist Workers Party and the IS in 1986 to create Solidarity: A Socialist, Feminist Organization.

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[21] "Right-Wing Rampage at Teamsters Convention," *The Bulletin*, June 5, 1981: 10–11.

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[38] *Ibid*: 253–254.

[39] *Ibid*: 256.

[40] *Ibid*: 247–249; 262–271.

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[46] Fitch, *Solidarity for Sale*: 231–243.

[47] *Ibid*: 255.



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