

Teamsters for a Democratic Union's national convention stumps for union bureaucracy, suppresses resolution against genocide in Gaza

Tom Hall**17 November 2023**

The Teamsters for a Democratic Union “reform” caucus held its annual national convention in Chicago from November 3 to 5. This was the group’s first national meeting since the Teamsters union rammed through a sellout contract at UPS.

TDU promoted that deal as one of the greatest in the history of the Teamsters union, but in reality it fell far below workers’ demands and leaves nearly 200,000 part-timers in poverty. It also opens the door for UPS to eliminate warehouse jobs through automation. In the aftermath of the contract’s passage, the company has been cutting full-time positions, including buyouts of 200 air freight pilots, and canceling out modest wage increases by eliminating local Market Rate Adjustments.

TDU has played a critical role as the de facto public relations arm of the new union administration of Teamsters General President Sean O’Brien, a fact which O’Brien himself has acknowledged. TDU has presented him as a militant reformer, when in reality he was a long-standing hatchet man for previous President James Hoffa, even being briefly suspended in 2013 for threatening TDU campaigners. But they buried the hatchet with O’Brien and endorsed him in the union’s 2021 leadership election, where he won on the basis of the lowest turnout in the history of direct elections at the Teamsters.

By upholding the authority of the union bureaucracy, TDU and groups like it are playing a central role in maintaining the stability not just of the apparatus but of the corporate-controlled political system, which relies upon the bureaucracy to contain the explosive growth of working class opposition. This opposition has found organized expression in the growth of rank-and-file committees at UPS and in workplaces all over the world. O’Brien is a regular visitor to the Biden White House. He played a key role in buying Congress time last year to ban a strike on the railroads, after a Biden-sponsored contract was rejected by the workers.

The United Auto Workers, where new President Shawn Fain is supported by a TDU-like “reform” group United All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), is following the playbook

set by the Teamsters at UPS. Fain is attempting to ram through contracts at the major automakers using a combination of threats, lies and likely outright fraud. Last week, Fain appeared at a joint rally with President Biden, which saw large counter-demonstrations over Biden’s support for Israel’s genocide in Gaza, to promote the auto contracts in front of a banner which instructed autoworkers to go “back to work.”

It is a measure of TDU’s integration into the highest levels of the union bureaucracy that both O’Brien and Fain were honored guests at the convention. Also making an appearance was Lindsay Dougherty, head of the Teamsters’ Motion Picture and Theatrical Trade Division. Her demagogic and vulgar tirades masked the union’s deliberate isolation of Teamster members from the writers’ and actors’ strikes. A pledge not to cross picket lines contained loopholes big enough to drive trucks through.

TDU’s rising stature has been financially remunerative. Ken Paff, a co-founder of the group in the late 1970s and formerly its national organizer, reportedly took expensive vacations this year snorkeling in the Caribbean and on safari in Tanzania. The Teamsters union has also poured more money into the organization itself than ever.

But its “success” in rising to the top of the apparatus has severely undermined its credibility in the working class. Its endorsement of O’Brien, prepared all the way back in 2018, produced a wave of revulsion among many of its own members, who left the organization in droves. The TDU is now identified among UPS workers with the new hated contract, as well as the undemocratic methods used to pass it.

In 2013, for example, the TDU attacked the administration of then-President James Hoffa for its diversion of funding from pensions to healthcare for full-timers, effectively freezing pension contributions. But this is exactly what the new UPS contract does, which TDU campaigned for. “It is mind-boggling to see how low Ken Paff, David Levin and TDU have sunk,” one worker remarked on social media.

TDU itself has been remarkably silent about the content of the convention. There were no public sessions, livestreams or videos available of the convention itself, and there was not even any reporting on the convention on TDU's own website and social media outside of photo galleries. Reportedly for the first time, registration in the final period before the convention was limited to phone only, with the online option removed, apparently in order to better vet those in attendance.

Sources who spoke to the WSWS described a crisis atmosphere within the convention, as the organization moved forcefully to silence internal dissent. Teamsters Mobilize, a group which had campaigned for a rejection of the UPS contract, sent delegates to the convention. TDU initially reportedly considered banning all Teamsters Mobilize members and all others who campaigned for a "no" vote at UPS from attending but ended up barring "only" two of its leading members.

The most revealing episode came when a Teamsters Mobilize member rose to propose a resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. That statement, which was republished on the group's website, read in part:

"Many of these bombs, and other weapons that Israel is using, have been supplied by the U.S. government. The United States government is and has been the biggest economic, political, and military supporter of Israel since its founding in 1948, and has sent over \$225 billion to Israel since 1951. Today, the United States funds 16% of Israel's defense budget.

"And now, the Biden administration is proposing giving another \$14.3 billion to Israel to fund the continued war on Gaza, much of which will be taken from our paychecks in taxes.

"[W]e have a duty to stand for the working people internationally and stand in opposition to attacks waged against them," the statement added. It concluded, "As Teamsters members, we call on IBT General President Sean O'Brien to 1) oppose the Biden administration's proposal to send billions of dollars in military aid to Israel, and 2) call on the U.S. government to immediately issue a call for a ceasefire and condemn Israel's bombing and ground invasion in Gaza."

Notwithstanding the WSWS's differences with Teamsters Mobilize, the decision to put forward the resolution was entirely to their credit. But it provoked a furious response from the floor. In the end, the proposal was tabled and never even voted on.

By tabling the motion, TDU has shamefully aligned itself with genocide and with imperialist war, which is being paid for with trillions of dollars being wrung out of workers through job losses, wage cuts and rampant exploitation. They are taking their line from the American union bureaucracy as a whole, which has spent decades supporting war and regime change operations by Washington all over the world.

It also makes clear that TDU will do nothing to defend Teamster members who are being retaliated against for public

support of the Palestinians. Among workers, there is growing support for industrial action to halt the manufacture and shipment of weapons. Given the central role of Teamsters members in US and world supply chains, any action taken by them would be crucial in cutting off supplies for the Gazan genocide, which would also almost certainly spread rapidly to other sections of the working class.

But TDU, having helped block a strike at UPS for higher wages and better working conditions, now opposes industrial action against genocide and war. In fact, they are two sides of the same coin, since the same corporate interests which were bailed out by the last-minute contract at UPS also stand to gain from a war whose aim, from Washington's point of view, is the domination of the Middle East.

As if to drive home the connection between the two, TDU also tabled a resolution proposed by the same Teamsters Mobilize member calling for open bargaining and an end to negotiations under non-disclosure agreements. In other words, TDU supported the Teamsters' ability to continue holding contract talks behind workers' backs.

The TDU's convention underscores that it is not a rank-and-file organization but a faction of the union bureaucracy, fearful of and distant from the workers.

The decades-long trajectory of TDU, from a reform caucus which often had to deal with physical violence from union officials, into a vital component of the bureaucracy itself, exposes the dead-end perspective of bureaucratic "self-reform." Workers cannot settle accounts with the apparatus by replacing "bad" officials with "good" ones. They have to overturn the entire structure and abolish the bureaucracy as such. Only on this basis can workers return control to where it belongs, the rank and file itself.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact