

What's behind the Teamsters' decision not to endorse in the presidential election

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Last week, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters announced that it would decline to endorse a candidate in the US presidential elections.

While General President Sean O'Brien is attempting to present this as an official stance of neutrality, it is widely understood as a de facto endorsement of Trump. The Democrats rely heavily on the resources and active support of the union bureaucracy as a key part of their election machinery. This is the first time the Teamsters have not endorsed the Democratic candidate since 1996.

More importantly, the decision comes after months of active courting by O'Brien and the International union with Trump and the Republicans. O'Brien met with Trump at his Mar-a-Lago estate at the start of the year, gave him a Teamsters-branded platform to attack immigrants at a candidate "roundtable," and finally spoke at the Republican National Convention in July. This was an ultranationalist speech which denounced global "elites" with no loyalty to the United States, channeling Hitler's denunciation of rootless international Jewish bankers.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who has wound up his own third party campaign to support Trump, revealed that O'Brien recently reached out to him to "send his love to Donald Trump."

The move produced outrage from the Democratic Party and confusion in the corporate media, perplexed that the union could fail to endorse Harris, the continuation of the self-titled "most pro-union president in American history." It also has produced a backlash by Teamster officials in the locals and Joint Councils. Local union bodies collectively covering most of the Teamsters membership have moved to endorse Harris, ignoring the official "neutrality."

The interests of the working class can find no expression in this bureaucratic "rebellion." Their concern is not the threat posed to democracy or the working class by the fascist Trump but the threat to their own lucrative political connections by failing to endorse the Democrats.

For the bureaucracy, the will of the membership is an obstacle to overcome. It plays no role whatsoever in its policies. Votes on contracts, officer elections and other key issues are routinely constructed to pave the way for a decision made in advance, through a combination of threats, lies and outright fraud.

Last year, the Teamsters bureaucracy ratified a contract at UPS which they claimed was an historic victory. These were lies. Since then, UPS has announced thousands of layoffs and plans to close or automate 200 facilities, citing the "labor certainty" provided by the Teamsters contract as a key factor in its plans.

It goes without saying that the Teamsters have said next to nothing about these job cuts, much less admitted that they flagrantly violated

the will of the membership O'Brien now claims to respect, following three separate polls, two of which showed support for Trump.

The unions of the Teamsters Rail Conference are also currently trying to quietly pass new rail contracts with even deeper concessions than the ones imposed by Congress.

Support for Trump

Nevertheless, the polls conducted by the Teamsters paint a picture of collapsing support for the Democratic Party in the working class. An electronic poll found Trump leading Harris by 59.6 to 34, while the telephone poll produced a 58-31 lead for Trump. A geographic breakdown in the online poll found Trump leading in all 50 states (though Harris easily carried the District of Columbia). Significantly, the phone poll also found 11 percent support for third parties, whom the Democrats are working vigorously to keep off the ballot.

The town hall straw polls conducted between April and early July found Biden leading Trump 44.3 to 36.3, with 7.3 percent supporting a third candidate. However, given the fact that these town halls were not widely publicized, these are likely to be workers closer to the local bureaucracy, which is more likely to support the Democrats. It is also obviously out of date, given the Democrats have since changed their candidate.

Of course, given that the polls were commissioned by a Trump supporter (although they were actually conducted by third-party research firms), there is reason to suspect they inflate Trump's actual level of support. But it is also undoubtedly true that substantial numbers of workers plan to vote for Trump in November.

This is not because they support Trump's fascistic agenda, which articulates the interests of vicious sections of the corporate and financial oligarchy. Rather, Trump is able to exploit broad-based social discontent that finds no expression in the political establishment.

Nevertheless, this is a dangerous development. Trump is seeking to build up a fascist movement, threatening to rule as a dictator and deport or arrest millions if made president. Through state and local Republicans he is conspiring to overturn any results against him, and through his racist agitation around Springfield, Ohio he is attempting to whip up political violence.

The source of Trump's apparent strength

Responsibility lies with those forces who work systematically to suppress the development of the class struggle. The bureaucracy has spent decades upholding the capitalist two-party system, principally through its alliance with the Democrats (although, after Kennedy's investigation into Teamster officials' Mafia ties and until 1988, the Teamsters endorsed Republicans for president.)

The Democratic Party is a capitalist party, which once used limited reforms to prevent the emergence of socialist revolution in America, but long ago dispensed with this and have been full partners in massive attacks on the social position of the working class. Trump is also able to exploit the fact that the Democrats are deeply unpopular and identified, legitimately, with inequality and war.

Trump also benefits from the fact that the Democrats have refused to even raise the danger of Trump's fascist politics and never seriously prosecuted Trump for his attempted overthrow of the 2020 elections. The one policy issue which they have obsessively fixated on is the deeply unpopular proxy war with Russia, on which Trump is seen as insufficiently reliable.

Over the same period that the Democrats abandoned social reforms, the bureaucrats which control the unions transformed themselves into open agents of capitalism, helping to maximize profitability through massive sellouts. But they paved the way for this even earlier through their ferocious anticommunism, including the mass expulsion of socialists during the McCarthy period, and their support for US imperialism.

Whatever the divisions over the November elections, the bureaucracy has also spent decades promoting racism against immigrants and foreigners, blaming them for "stealing" American jobs. They have helped poison the political environment, setting the stage for Trump's own racist agitation.

The Biden administration is seeking to build a wartime alliance with the bureaucracy, aimed at securing the home front while Washington barrels ahead towards World War III. Biden put this bluntly in July, when he called the AFL-CIO his "domestic NATO."

Biden's policy of allying the government with union officials and big business to fight enemies of the "nation" is known as corporatism, which first developed in Mussolini's Italy, where it was a core part of fascist ideology. Biden and the Democrats are not fascists, but they are creating an environment favorable for the growth of fascism.

A critical role is also played by the various organizations of the upper-middle class, the political pseudo-left, such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and *Labor Notes*. In the UAW and other unions, they have been fully integrated into the trade union apparatus, assisting in pushing through sellout contracts and subordinating the working class to the Democratic Party.

In the case of the Teamsters, the pseudo-left organizations, through the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, backed O'Brien, presenting him as a force for "reforming the apparatus," and are still in coalition with him and occupy top posts in the union. Their central concern is to block the independent organization of the rank-and-file in opposition to the apparatus as a whole.

The independence of the working class

Trump is only able to capitalize on this, however, as long as workers remain trapped within the confines of the two-party system. An entirely different outcome is possible if the working class breaks out of this political straitjacket and develop an independent movement of their own.

An upsurge in the class struggle is underway which has the potential to alter the political environment. More than 33,000 Boeing workers are on strike, and more walkouts are looming on the East Coast docks. This upsurge is taking the form of a rebellion against the union apparatus, but it must take an organized and conscious form, through the development of rank-and-file committees to transfer power from the bureaucracy to the workers.

The eruption of the class struggle forms the real basis for a genuine fight against fascism. This must be a class-conscious movement directed against the source of fascism, the capitalist system itself.

Fascism emerges not out of Trump's personal characteristics but rather the crisis of US capitalism. The massive levels of inequality and decades of war in the country are no longer compatible with democratic norms. A progressive way out of the crisis is possible only through the independent mobilization of the power of the working class.

This means that a rebellion against the apparatus is a critical part of the struggle against fascism. Power must be taken out of the hands of this corrupt, pro-capitalist layer and taken in hand by the workers themselves.

At Boeing, on the railroads, at UPS and elsewhere, workers are increasingly building rank-and-file committees as a new leadership capable of fighting against both management and union sellouts.

The strike movement shows such a movement can be built, which will fundamentally alter the political environment.

The development of a rank-and-file rebellion against the apparatus must be connected to the building of a socialist leadership in the working class, based on a political program that articulates the real interests of the working class.

The entire noxious framework of American politics can be undermined and opposed only by bringing into the working class a conscious understanding of its own history and of a scientific, Marxist understanding of the nature of capitalist society.



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