

TDU conference endorses Trump supporter Sean O'Brien for re-election as Teamsters general president

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From November 7th to the 9th, the union “reform” caucus Teamsters for a Democratic Union held their 50th annual convention. The event was dedicated to platforming and endorsing Sean O'Brien for re-election as president in 2026. O'Brien, a right-wing Trump supporter who has presided over tens of thousands of job losses at UPS and other companies, was invited to speak and given an overwhelming vote to endorse his campaign for reelection.

In endorsing O'Brien, the TDU, which for decades has served as a model for would-be “democratic reform” union groups across America, is effectively endorsing support for fascist dictatorship. This is the inevitable outcome of their rejection of a struggle by the rank and file to overthrow the corrupt union apparatus—as advocated by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees—in favor of bureaucratic self-reform. An approach that aligns with the TDU's opposition to the fight for the political independence of the working class and socialism.

Present at the convention were representatives from similar “reform” groups such as Unite All Workers for Democracy of the United Auto Workers, similar factions in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and the United Food and Commercial Workers, as well as the Federal Unionists Network. None of them raised objections to O'Brien's presence, which effectively amounts to support. Indeed, many of them, especially UAWD, support and even helped to orchestrate similar overtures to Trump.

Labor Notes, the pseudo-left publication which sponsors TDU and many of these groups, carried a fawning article which openly defended what it falsely characterized as a “neutral” stance towards Trump.

O'Brien is one of the leading figures of a large section of the American union bureaucracy lining up with the fascistic Trump administration, endorsing in particular trade war measures, and his attacks on immigrants and foreign workers. Just a week before the convention, O'Brien had appeared with US Vice President JD Vance to demand Democrats end the shutdown by surrendering to Trump's demands, which they eventually did. O'Brien was one of 10 major union officials, also including AFGE (American Federation of Government Employees) President Everett Kelley and the heads of several airline unions, present at the event.

Since speaking at the Republican National Convention last year, O'Brien has built a close relationship with Trump, and even says he speaks with him on the phone several times a month. He has also developed ties with Senator Josh Hawley, who played a major role in the January 6 conspiracy, publicly endorsing his anti-immigrant and anti-transgender rhetoric. He has been a guest on the podcast of far-right political pundit Tucker Carlson, formerly of Fox News.

Among those joining O'Brien was United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain, whose administration likewise rests on the TDU-inspired Unite All Workers for Democracy. Fain's own embrace of Trump has

been openly defended by UAWD, claiming that trade war measures and the elimination of the jobs of workers in Canada, Mexico and other countries will benefit American workers. Fain has also been furiously defended by pseudo-left groups like the Democratic Socialists of America, which supports TDU and similar formations.

Fain has spent the last two years all but campaigning for World War III, citing the war economy during the Second World War as the model for today. He gave a major pro-war speech at the 2024 Labor Notes convention, which barely avoided a breakup over the issue of the Gaza genocide. TDU, for its part, rejected a motion condemning the genocide at its last convention in 2023.

The embrace of Trump expresses in the most open form the function of the union bureaucracy as an industrial police force, whose social privileges depend on its ability to enforce sellouts. These privileges are drawn from its longstanding support for US imperialism and ferocious anti-communism and nationalism. For decades, the mantra of the trade union bureaucracy has been “America First,” identifying its interests with American capitalism against its rivals. In the meantime, it has covered for its own role in enforcing massive job and wage cuts by blaming “foreign” workers.

The growing support for fascism is the most overt and crude expression of the labor bureaucracy's hatred and fear of the working class. It can only be overthrown through a rebellion from below and replaced with a new leadership, rank-and-file committees, based on a strategy not of accepting management “rights” but for the independent mobilization of the working class on a world scale.

The record of O'Brien and TDU

Among New England Teamster members, O'Brien was already an infamous thug when TDU endorsed him in the last union election in 2021, which his slate won on record low turnout. Today, TDU functions as a key section of his administration, with members on the IBT General Executive Board. O'Brien himself acknowledged their crucial role at last month's convention, declaring that the alliance with TDU “has proven to be effective” and that he would “make sure that this coalition continues to thrive, grow, and collaborate.”

TDU dedicated much of the conference to training new aspiring bureaucrats at workshops covering “how to organize contract campaigns, enforce their contracts, develop new leaders, run for local union office, and more,” according to an account on its website.

In 2021, with O'Brien's first election, the WSWs wrote that TDU's

endorsement showed “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.’” They assisted the bureaucracy of which it is a part to create a “new public face of the union under conditions where decades of betrayals led by the James P. Hoffa—the son of the better-known Jimmy Hoffa—administration has badly tattered its image.”

It added, citing O’Brien’s then-close connections to the Biden White House, that O’Brien would “facilitate closer connections between the state and the Teamsters union, including its most overtly right-wing layers, as well as with the pseudo-left.”

Subsequent developments have confirmed this. In 2023, with critical support from TDU, the Teamsters used the “strike ready” campaign to disarm UPS workers, avoid a strike and push through a sellout contract. Since then tens of thousands of jobs at UPS have been destroyed through automation. For the most part, this has not even been acknowledged by the Teamsters.

Meanwhile, genuine opposition emerged from the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which fought for workers to take matters into their own hands for a national strike and campaigned against the sellout contract. While TDU has remained silent, the UPS RFC has consistently sought to expose the company’s “Network of the Future” jobs massacre and urge independent action to fight it.

O’Brien’s administration also pushed through sellouts in the rail industry—where they stalled for time to give Congress the chance to block a national strike—and at Anheuser-Busch, Molson-Coors, ABF and Yellow. In the latter, 20,000 workers lost their jobs when the company went under.

These sellouts have contributed to the growth of an industrial slaughterhouse of deadly workplace disasters, including the recent plane crash at the UPS Worldport facility in Louisville, Kentucky that killed 14 people. Significantly, no reference to this disaster appears in any of the published reports of the convention, even though it took place only three days prior to its opening.

As for state connections, the embrace of Trump is in continuity with, and a development upon, the bureaucracy’s corporatist relations with the Biden White House. In particular, the Biden administration had also hoped to use the bureaucracy to discipline the working class in preparation for new, bloody wars against China, Russia and other. This was summed up in a 2024 statement that the AFL-CIO was “his domestic NATO.”

Now, wide layers of the bureaucracy are auditioning for a similar role under the regime Trump is trying to build.

The pseudo-left’s approach to Trump

Within recent months, a definite tendency towards accommodation with Trump has openly emerged.

The most direct expression of this so far is the visit by Democratic Socialists of America member and mayor-elect of New York City Zohran Mamdani to the White House, where he claimed he could “work together” with the would-be fuhrer to bring down the cost of living. Mamdani’s visit has been hailed as a tactical “masterstroke” by the rest of the DSA and the pseudo-left.

Similar arguments were made at the TDU convention. Steering committee member Tyler Condo was quoted by *Labor Notes* as saying, “I don’t like Trump either . . . I wish Sean O’Brien was taking a stronger stand against what the president is doing to workers and immigrant workers and unions. But the majority of Teamsters I work with support

Trump. I don’t go to work every day looking for a reason to argue with them.” He added that “Our goal as TDU is to make action plans so we can mobilize Teamsters no matter who you support.”

The *Labor Notes* article concurred that “TDU is most effective when it focuses on organizing members around union and workplace issues rather than partisan politics.”

This is criminal indifference to fascism, which is treated as some sort of external issue which the working class need not take a position on. In fact, the chief target of Trump’s dictatorship is the working class. Behind Trump stands the American oligarchy, which is determined to use dictatorship to crush all resistance from below and impose slave-like conditions. Indeed, Trump is already carrying out massive violence against immigrant workers, which will be expanded to the whole working class.

In referencing (and embellishing) support for Trump in the working class, Condo cynically attempts to shift blame from himself to others. In reality, to the extent that certain layers of the working class have been vulnerable to Trump, a major responsibility lies with TDU and others who insist on subordinating workers to the right-wing labor bureaucracy, and in opposing the building of an independent, socialist movement in the working class.

The political situation would look radically different if and when the working class, unencumbered by the bureaucracy, launched massive national struggles in logistics, auto, rail, healthcare and other industries, coalescing into a broader movement against inequality and oligarchy.

For decades, TDU and *Labor Notes*’ mantra of “no politics” has actually meant no *socialist* politics, while adapting in reality to the capitalist politics in which the union bureaucracy is intimately involved. Now, at the climax of the breakdown of American democracy, their opposition to socialism has become an acceptance of fascism.

A diametrically opposite program is being advanced by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. In a recent statement, the IWA-RFC declared: “A basic task of the growing working class movement is a rebellion against the union apparatus and the destruction of its social influence.” It added, “This must be developed into a powerful movement of the working class in defense of its basic social rights.”

“Workers must reject the nationalist poison that seeks to play workers in one country off against workers in another and to blame immigrants and minorities. These are not enemies but brothers and sisters, all being exploited by the same financial oligarchy.”

The statement concluded: “Workers must connect the defense of jobs with the end of the domination of the oligarchy. We must take control of the economy out of their hands through the expropriation of the banks and major corporations and their placement under workers’ control. At the same time, this is the only realistic basis for fighting dictatorship in the US and around the world, since the selfish and irrational class interests of the capitalist class are the source of dictatorship.”

The way forward for rank-and-file workers is to join the fight to expand the IWA-RFC.



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