

Teamsters for a Democratic Union helps return far-right Teamsters general president Sean O'Brien to power unopposed

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17 June 2026

At the Teamsters' 31st International Convention, held this week at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, the Teamsters for a Democratic Union helped return Sean O'Brien and Fred Zuckerman to power unopposed.

The O'Brien-Zuckerman Teamsters United slate was reelected by white ballot Tuesday after no opposition candidate received enough delegate votes to reach the membership ballot. TDU, which endorsed O'Brien for a second term, has thus helped secure another five years for an ultra-right union president whose record includes mass layoffs, blocked strikes and open collaboration with Donald Trump and fascistic forces.

The election decision was settled by convention delegates in Las Vegas, at a luxury casino resort, while 1.3 million Teamsters were denied the right to vote on the top offices.

Only five years ago, TDU and its pseudo-left allies promoted O'Brien-Zuckerman as the beginning of a new era of militancy, democracy and "rank-and-file" power. TDU said the campaign offered "new leadership and a new direction." *Jacobin* and *Labor Notes* hailed the coalition between TDU and O'Brien as proof that the "reform" wing of the bureaucracy had opened a new road forward.

None of these promises came true for workers. The only "reform" that materialized was the elevation of TDU members into higher positions inside the apparatus.

O'Brien's central pledge in 2021 was that he would lead a showdown with UPS. Instead, the Teamsters apparatus, with TDU's full support, used the 2023 "strike ready" campaign as a bait-and-switch operation to prevent a strike and push through a sellout contract.

The result has been one of the largest corporate job-cutting campaigns in the United States. UPS announced 12,000 layoffs in 2024. In 2025, the company eliminated 48,000 jobs, launched driver buyouts and closed 93 facilities. It plans to eliminate up to 30,000 more positions in 2026. These cuts have followed directly on the heels of the contract that O'Brien and TDU sold to workers as a breakthrough.

O'Brien's other major "achievement" has been to steer the Teamsters into active support for Trump and the far right. He became the first Teamsters general president to speak at the

Republican National Convention, where he praised Trump and presented the union bureaucracy as a partner in the nationalist politics of the Republican Party. He has cultivated relations with figures such as Josh Hawley and Tucker Carlson, promoted "America First" trade-war policies and echoed the rhetoric of the Trump administration against immigrant workers.

O'Brien's politics express the orientation of the union bureaucracy as a whole. The apparatus rests on nationalism, anti-communism and corporatism. Under conditions of capitalist crisis, war and dictatorship, it seeks a place for itself inside the state as a labor police force, suppressing workers' struggles in the name of "national competitiveness" and "American jobs."

TDU has served as his left cover. O'Brien, a thug who once threatened violence against TDU members, was repackaged as a reformer, democrat and militant. TDU now explains away his alliance with Trump as a secondary issue. In a recent *Jacobin* interview, TDU leaders Antonio Rosario and Bryan Trafford dismissed opposition to O'Brien's far-right politics as a distraction from "organizing."

"If you're against Trump, I am personally 100 percent with you," Rosario said. "But TDU is not for that." Trafford added that if TDU were defined as a political organization, "that would cut us off from half or more of Teamster members that we want to engage."

This is despicable opportunism. TDU will not mobilize workers against Trump, dictatorship, deportations or the assault on democratic rights. It will not fight to win workers to a socialist and internationalist program. It will work with anyone, including gangsters and fascists, provided they offer access to the apparatus. The one force TDU opposes with real hostility are the workers seeking to build rank-and-file committees independent of the bureaucracy.

The personal rewards are considerable. People associated with TDU have obtained paid positions throughout the union machine. Matt Taibi draws roughly \$250,000 in combined compensation as an IBT vice president and Local 251 secretary-treasurer. Willie Ford draws roughly \$269,000 as an

International Trustee and Local 71 president. Nick Perry receives more than \$150,000 as an IBT training coordinator. Brooke Reeves, Bryan Trafford, Tony Suazo, Antonio Rosario, Dorian Stone and Alex Murphy hold paid positions as business agents, organizers or as International staff, with compensation in many cases well above \$100,000.

For decades, TDU presented “one member, one vote” elections for top Teamsters officers as its signature achievement. In 1988, the Justice Department filed a racketeering lawsuit against the Teamsters, charging that the union was dominated by organized crime and seeking to impose a government trusteeship. TDU worked through the federal intervention—court briefs, proposals to the Justice Department and dealings with oversight bodies—on the grounds that this would help secure direct elections. The 1989 settlement placed the union under federal oversight and introduced direct elections for top officers, which TDU celebrated as the decisive breakthrough in opening up the union.

TDU later warned that this right could become meaningless if the apparatus controlled nominations and election rules. “The Right to Vote isn’t worth much if the incumbents control the rules and the election,” it declared. It also warned that raising the delegate threshold for nominations would be “the easiest way to stop most Teamster elections,” because candidates must first win support from convention delegates before the membership can vote on them.

TDU now defends the machinery it once warned could strangle opposition. Its co-chair Frank Halstead recently described the same threshold as a “reasonable” test of whether an opposition slate deserves to reach the members.

This exposes the real content of union “reform.” It does not mean workplace democracy, rank-and-file control or the transfer of power to workers on the shop floor. It means reshuffling personnel and factional alignments at the top of the apparatus while leaving its anti-worker structure intact. TDU reduces workers to props, spectators and voting blocs while offering a “rank-and-file” veneer of legitimacy to one faction of the bureaucracy or another.

This was TDU’s perspective from the beginning. It emerged in the 1970s around the International Socialists on an explicitly non-socialist basis. Its founders rejected any struggle to raise among workers the political questions of capitalism, nationalism and the class character of the union bureaucracy. They insisted that such issues would divide workers, and that the immediate practical task was to pressure or replace corrupt officials.

This separated the fight against corruption from any appraisal of the bureaucracy itself. The apparatus had not degenerated because of the bad morals of individual leaders. It developed on the basis of nationalism, anti-communism, class collaboration and the defense of American capitalism. TDU proposed to “reform” the apparatus on the same political foundations that

had produced its degeneration.

The experience of Ron Carey already demonstrated the bankruptcy of this perspective. TDU helped ride Carey into the top leadership in the 1990s and still cites his election as one of its great achievements. Carey’s administration ended in disaster after union funds were funneled through Democratic Party-linked channels into his reelection campaign.

The same pattern has been repeated wherever the model has been tried. Unite All Workers for Democracy backed Shawn Fain for UAW president, denounced socialist autoworker Will Lehman’s candidacy to abolish the bureaucracy as “antiunion,” and then supported an administration that has presided over layoffs, nationalist tariffs and a new corruption scandal under the federal monitor.

While the Teamsters convention is taking place in Las Vegas, the UAW is holding its constitutional convention in Detroit, where the Fain apparatus is seeking to prevent socialist autoworker Will Lehman from being nominated as a candidate. Over the previous weekend, Labor Notes held its conference in the Chicago area. These events form a balance sheet for the entire milieu. Its “success stories” are now in office, and their record consists of layoffs, betrayals, corruption allegations, nationalist politics and suppression of rank-and-file opposition.

The same social layer plays a similar role in electoral politics. The DSA, Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez and Mamdani channel anger back into the Democratic Party and the capitalist state, combining left phrases with adaptation to the right, austerity and imperialism. Mamdani’s meetings with Trump and his “Commission on Government Efficiency” in New York City are only the latest expression of this politics.

Workers must draw the necessary conclusions. The issue is not that TDU chose the wrong bureaucrat or that workers need a better reform caucus. The entire strategy of pressuring, capturing or reshuffling the apparatus has failed.

Workers need organizations of struggle independent of and opposed to the bureaucracy: rank-and-file committees in every workplace, controlled by workers themselves and linked across industries and national borders. These committees must fight layoffs, concessions, speedup, deportations, tariffs, war and dictatorship on the basis of an international socialist program.

TDU’s “one member, one vote” campaign has ended with the membership denied a vote. This fact sums up the whole reform perspective. The task facing workers is not to refurbish the apparatus, but to abolish its control and transfer power to the rank and file.



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