

Teamsters and Department of Justice move to end federal oversight of union after 37 years

Alex Findijs
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The US Department of Justice and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters filed a joint motion on June 17 to wind down the remaining federal monitorship over the union, nearly four decades after the 1989 consent decree was imposed in the name of combating corruption and organized crime influence.

The filing came immediately after the Teamsters bureaucracy secured another five years in office for General President Sean O'Brien and General Secretary-Treasurer Fred Zuckerman. At the Teamsters' 31st International Convention in Las Vegas, the O'Brien-Zuckerman slate was "re-elected" after no opposition candidates received enough delegate votes to force a one-member-one-vote election by the membership.

This means that 1.3 million Teamsters were denied the right to vote for the union's top offices.

This is the context in which O'Brien is claiming that the end of federal oversight proves the Teamsters have entered a "new era" of internal democracy and transparency. "Over the past four years, we have developed a system of internal controls and created a culture of vigilance in our union," he said. "Our efforts have proven that we can police our own, and the controls we have put in place are more stringent than any labor organization in the country."

The reality is the opposite. The winding down of the monitorship does not mark the end of corruption inside the union or even a separation between the union bureaucracy and the capitalist state. It amounts to official sanction for the corruption and bureaucratic suppression through which the apparatus polices the rank and file.

Only days later, the federal monitor overseeing the United Auto Workers filed a new report on corruption under UAW President Shawn Fain, including allegations that Fain abused his authority to get perks for his fiancée and retaliated against a rival official. This followed the UAW convention, where the Democratic Socialists of America, Labor Notes and similar defenders of the bureaucracy treated Fain's appearance as a coronation.

In both the Teamsters and the UAW, federal oversight has

not produced workers' democracy. It has provided a mechanism through which the capitalist state has intervened to stabilize, rehabilitate and regulate corrupt union apparatuses under conditions of growing rank-and-file opposition. The state and the corporations require the services of these apparatuses to contain the class struggle.

O'Brien's record exposes the fraud of the claim that the Teamsters have been "cleaned up." Before becoming general president, O'Brien was a longtime factional operative under the administration of James P. Hoffa, the son of the better-known Jimmy Hoffa who ruled the union from 1957 to 1971. In 2013, O'Brien threatened dissident Teamsters in Rhode Island Local 251 who opposed one of his allies, declaring that they had a "major problem" and "need to be punished." He later served a suspension from union office over the threats.

Since taking office, O'Brien has presided over one betrayal after another. At UPS, where the Teamsters pushed through a contract the bureaucracy hailed as "historic" in 2023, the company is carrying out a deep restructuring plan which has destroyed tens of thousands of union jobs. It eliminated 48,000 jobs in 2025 and announced plans to cut up to 30,000 more operational positions in 2026.

O'Brien has also cultivated open ties with the extreme right. In 2024, he became the first Teamsters president to address the Republican National Convention, praising Donald Trump as "one tough SOB" and presenting the union bureaucracy as a vehicle for a nationalist political realignment. For Trump's Justice Department, this is obviously a positive.

The origins of the Teamsters' Mafia connections cannot be separated from the anti-socialist and nationalist politics of the bureaucracy. In the 1930s, Trotskyist militants in Minneapolis played a decisive role in transforming the Teamsters from a narrow craft union into a powerful industrial force. Farrell Dobbs and other leaders of the Socialist Workers Party helped organize the 1934 Minneapolis general strike and the over-the-road organizing campaigns that became the foundation of the union's

national power.

Jimmy Hoffa would later admit in his autobiography he had learned important organizing methods from Dobbs, but he rejected his socialist and internationalist perspective. As then-Teamsters president Daniel Tobin, the Roosevelt administration and the federal government moved against the Trotskyist leadership—including jailing 18 leaders under the Smith Act for seditious activity for opposing US entry into World War II—Hoffa emerged as an anti-communist factional fighter within the union.

Hoffa and his allies substituted gangster methods, nationalism and racketeering for the class-struggle perspective that had animated the Minneapolis strikes. Mafia figures were brought into the union apparatus, pension funds were looted and violence was used against both management and internal opponents.

Earlier federal probes of the Teamsters, from the McClellan Committee hearings of the late 1950s to Robert F. Kennedy’s Justice Department campaign against Hoffa in the early 1960s, used real corruption as the pretext for weakening and disciplining what was still a powerful workers’ organization. By 1989, the consent decree functioned more as a state-managed rehabilitation of a discredited apparatus, restoring its credibility while tightening its integration with the capitalist state.

The Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) faction helped prepare and embraced this intervention by the capitalist state. It treated the imposition of direct elections under federal supervision and the removal of gangster-connected union officials as a democratic breakthrough, rather than as part of a state-managed restructuring of the bureaucracy. The election of Ron Carey—former president of Local 804 in New York City—as General President in 1991, backed by TDU, was presented as proof that the Teamsters had been reclaimed by the membership.

In reality, the basic class character of the apparatus remained unchanged. Carey’s administration did not reverse the destruction of jobs, concessions or the subordination of workers to the profit demands of the corporations. His own presidency ended in scandal after a campaign finance scheme involving the sending of union funds to Democratic Party-affiliated organizations, which then kicked back the money to Carey’s reelection campaign was uncovered. The fall of Carey paved the way for the rise of Hoffa Jr., whose administration oversaw decades of concessions and bureaucratic suppression, with O’Brien at his side for much of that period.

Its endorsement of O’Brien in the 2021 union election marked a new stage in TDU’s function as a key “reform” cover for the apparatus. A man once notorious for threatening TDU supporters was repackaged as a militant

reformer, while TDU suppressed opposition to his far-right politics and his role in enforcing concessions. In exchange, TDU-associated figures were elevated into top leadership posts.

In May, TDU declared its members were “proud to support the reelection of Sean O’Brien,” lying that “the Hoffa-era concessions stand is closed.” After O’Brien and Zuckerman were returned without a contested membership vote, TDU congratulated them and called on workers to “come together” behind the bureaucracy.

The end of federal oversight does not mark the end of state integration. It marks a change in form. The apparatus no longer requires the same external supervision because it has been stabilized, consolidated and politically prepared for the struggles ahead. The Teamsters bureaucracy under O’Brien has shown that it can block opposition inside the union, impose sellout contracts, police workers’ anger and align itself with the political needs of the ruling class.

The same lesson emerges from the UAW. The federal monitor there has not produced democracy or accountability. The monitor’s reports have exposed the thuggish factional methods of the Fain administration, while the “reform” milieu around Labor Notes and the DSA has worked to promote Fain as the embodiment of rank-and-file militancy. The nomination of Will Lehman at the UAW convention demonstrated the opposite: that workers are seeking a way to break through the apparatus, not reform it.

The working class must draw the necessary conclusions. The state is not a neutral arbiter of union democracy. Its interventions into the unions are aimed at preserving the apparatus, not abolishing it. Nor can workers rely on “reform” factions that seek positions within the bureaucracy and adapt themselves to its privileges, methods and political alliances.

Restoring power to the rank and file requires not another reshuffling of officials, another supervised election or another appeal to the capitalist political establishment, but a rebellion from below.

Teamsters workers must build rank-and-file committees in every workplace, independent of the union bureaucracy and all its factions. These committees must fight to transfer power from the apparatus to the shop floor, unite workers across industries and prepare a struggle against layoffs, concessions, speedup and the growing threat of authoritarian rule.



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