Workers' Struggles, Past and Present

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Published by Temple University Press


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Every occupation has its own ambience. We are familiar with the particular mystiques of farm workers, coal miners, secretaries. At this moment, perhaps no occupational group has more vividly impressed itself on the public mind than the truckdriver, or, to use the archaic term which denominates the union, “teamster.”

Dan E. Moldea’s *The Hoffa Wars: Teamsters, Rebels, Politicians, and the Mob* (New York and London, 1978) and Steven Brill’s *The Teamsters* (New York, 1978) by and large feed the romanticized notion of teamster exceptionalism. And in truth, the history of truckdriving in this country since the 1930s leaves one gasping. Consider, for instance:

- The leading organizer of teamster industrial unionism in the 1930s was not Hoffa, but Farrell Dobbs, a member of the Socialist Workers Party. Dobbs preached the need for regional union organization and a national collective bargaining agreement. “I realized,” Hoffa later stated on television, “how right he was” (Moldea, p. 28). Yet it was also Hoffa who, as a personal favor to Dan Tobin, then president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, took a hundred or so goons into Dobbs’s Minneapolis stronghold at the beginning of World War II and, in Hoffa’s phrase, “had the war” (Moldea, p. 32). As Dobbs points out,
Hoffa was helped in winning it by the Minneapolis Police Department, the courts, the mayor, the governor, state anti-labor legislation, and the Government of the United States, which jailed Dobbs and 17 others as the first victims of the Smith Act.

- Hoffa appears first to have been introduced to organized crime by his mistress, Sylvia Pagano (Moldea, p. 25). Then, in 1941, when John L. Lewis's brother Denny sought to organize Michigan teamsters for the CIO, a raid which the UAW declined to support, “Perrone, Angelo Meli, Frank Coppola, and other crime figures gave Hoffa the support he needed to drive the CIO raiders out of Detroit” (Moldea, p. 37).

- Hoffa was sent to prison for jury tampering by the testimony of Edward Partin, who, it seems, was offended when Hoffa threatened in 1962 to assassinate Robert Kennedy. One of the many Teamster fellow travellers who pressured Partin to recant his testimony so that Hoffa might be released from prison was Audie Murphy, most decorated GI of World War II (Moldea, p. 279).

- Harold Gibbons, Socialist, boss of the St. Louis teamsters, organizer, and eligible heir to Hoffa’s power, broke with Hoffa when, as both Moldea and Brill recount, Gibbons (then helping Hoffa to administer the national organization) ordered the flags at Teamster headquarters in Washington lowered to half-mast after John F. Kennedy’s assassination.

- The exhausted National Guardsmen who fired on students at Kent State University on May 4, 1970, had been transferred from policing a wildcat strike of teamsters (Moldea, p. 265).

- The CIA, through, among others, its deputy director of plans Richard Bissell (a Yale man), and evidently with Hoffa’s help, offered the Mafia $1,000,000 to kill Castro. This was more than letting out a contract. Under Batista the American mob had substantial business investments in Cuban organized vice. Part of the deal between the CIA and the mob was that American gangsters use “their old contracts on the island to set up a small network of spies” so as “to pinpoint the roads that Castro might use to deploy troops and tanks in meeting the attacking forces” (Moldea, p. 130, quoting Time magazine. See, in general, his chap. 7, “Teaming Up Against Castro,” based in good part on the Church Committee investigation).

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- During the month prior to John F. Kennedy’s assassination, Jack Ruby talked on the phone with Irwin Weiner, chief Teamster bondsman (October 26); Barney Baker, a Teamster enforcer (November 7, 8, 11); Murray Willer, head of the Southern Conference of Teamsters (November 8). Ruby also called Nofio
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Pecora, a prominent member of the Marcello “family” (October 30), and Baker was in contact with David Yaras, a brutal man who had helped to organize Local 390 in Miami, and was a recognized go-between for Marcello and Santos Trafficante, with whom Ruby was jailed in Cuba in 1959. Government investigators allege that on November 21 Ruby was in the offices of oil millionaire H. L. Hunt at about the same time as Jim Braden, a criminal and Teamster afficionado who was also near and in the Texas School Book depository the next day, November 22, when John F. Kennedy was killed (Moldea, chap. 8, “Coincidence or Conspiracy”).

During the early Teamster organizing, Dobbs, but not Hoffa, tried to improve the working conditions of owner-operators. When Hoffa was imprisoned in the 1960s his underworld supporters were bought off and thereby won over by Frank Fitzsimmons. Accordingly, Hoffa, when he was released from prison by Nixon, perforce turned to rebellious owner-operators and other dissidents in an effort to build a base for his return to Teamster office. Thus Hoffa supported the 1974 wildcat of the Fraternal Association of Steel Haulers against high gasoline prices.

Clearly incidents such as the above are the stuff of Teamster romance. They foster the image of macho, country-and-western truckdrivers, a little bit different from all others, “thinking and talking about their cowboylike pasts, presents, and futures” (Moldea, pp. 326–327).

However, truckdrivers are employees like other workers and face essentially the same problems. This is true even of owner-operators, whose essential contention in the work stoppage underway is that they are not small businessmen, subject to the anti-trust laws, but employees protected by the National Labor Relations Act. Truckdrivers own their own tools (if owner-operators) or (even if company drivers) have more control over their conditions of work than the assembly-line worker. These circumstances contribute to the clan of teamster rebels, just as underground work, danger, and the cultural isolation of Appalachia no doubt have something to do with the remarkable spirit and solidarity of miners. Still it is a dangerous error, which offers no real help to the dogged men and women seeking to change the Teamsters union, to suppose that the problems faced by truckdrivers are fundamentally unlike the problems confronting miners, autoworkers, steelworkers, and the rest of us.

All major American unions remain in need of a thoroughgoing democratic revolution. Autoworkers cannot vote directly for their national union officers. Steelworkers cannot vote directly on the Basic Steel Contract. In these unions, filing a grievance is a good deal like dropping a stone into a
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very deep well. In none of these unions do members possess elementary rights of due process, such as the right to be present at proceedings where one's grievance (say, a grievance protesting a discharge) is discussed; the right to be represented by one's own attorney; the right to have a written record made of the proceeding; the right to continue on the job until finally shown to be "guilty"; and so on.

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters is simply a little more so. In Teamsters' organizing, the employer is often pressed to contribute for the right not to be unionized. Among teamsters, dissidents get their houses bombed (Tom Gwilt, William "Red" Anderson, Jim Leavitt) or, at least in New Jersey, get killed (Anthony Castellito). And as everyone knows, Teamster honchos invest their members' pension funds in casinos, phony real estate developments, the drug trade, et cetera, more brazenly than their counterparts elsewhere.

Hence the special pathos of rebellion among teamsters, as, in a similar although by no means identical context, among farm workers or Southern pulpwood workers. Evil is so dramatic. The simplest democratic decencies, such as the right to elect shop stewards, appear almost revolutionary. To listen even casually to the rhetoric of Teamster rebels is to appreciate how bourgeois democracy, and Christianity, have functioned historically as revolutionary credos. At the 1977 convention of Teamsters for a Democratic Union a keynote speaker invoked Magna Charta, Milton's "Areopagitica" (which he struggled to pronounce but understood perfectly), and the Bill of Rights. At the 1978 TDU convention Peter Camarata, the organization's candidate for Teamster president, described himself as a born-again Christian. There was nothing at all funny about either speech. These are the beliefs which enabled these courageous rank-and-file leaders to believe that they can, indeed, overcome some day.

Accordingly, Marxists who organize within the Teamsters union face a familiar dilemma. Only with their energetic aid, seemingly, can the bourgeois revolution in the union be effected. Yet the fruits of successful democratic business unionism are all too evident. The mainline CIO unions—UAW, Steelworkers, and so on—offer one set of examples. Arnold Miller's election to the presidency of the United Mine Workers and its sequel is another. One need go no further than the history of the Teamsters themselves to prove the point still again. The IBT Bad Guys—Hoffa, Fitzsimmons, Rolland McMaster, Dave Johnson—were one and all rank-and-file reformers in the 1930s. Dan Moldea, scathingly impatient with the so-called reformation of Hoffa's last years, nonetheless affirms that in the 1930s Hoffa showed "unparalleled enthusiasm for . . . union democracy, rank-and-file control of officials and union policies" (Moldea, p. 27). Moreover, "he was willing to make tremendous personal sacrifices . . ." (Moldea, p. 28). What happens to such individuals? Can it be prevented? Must union organization endlessly reproduce dull and corrupt bureaucracy
as a result? Why should TDU, or PROD, or FASH, avoid the same fate, much less move on from union reform to socialist transformation?

Critical reading in this connection are Steven Brill's painstaking and brilliant chapters on the typical Teamster member, Al Barkett (Brill, pp. 25 ff., chap. 7), the typical honest local union officer, Ron Carey (chap. 5), and the atypical, tragic Harold Gibbons (chap. 10). Barkett, in the last analysis, supports the existing leadership because it has paid off materially for him. Carey, in the last analysis, opposes the existing leadership because it prevents him from advancing in the union without total sacrifice of principle. Gibbons, in the last analysis, compromised so long that when the time came to take his life in his hands and challenge Fitzsimmons for the Hoffa legacy, he was silent.

Brill and Moldea differ somewhat about the early Gibbons. Brill tells of his conversion to socialism at a University of Wisconsin summer school for workers in the Depression. Moldea, citing the McClellan Committee hearings, states that Gibbons "literally purchased" St. Louis Local 688. But I have no reason to doubt Brill's account (pp. 356-357) of what Gibbons did with Local 688 in the late 1940s and early 1950s as the Cold War set in.

"Gibbons' workers got free, unlimited hospitalization and medical care for themselves and their spouses and children—a benefit virtually unheard of in 1951. 'Other workers, if they had any health protection at all,' Gibbons explained, 'had insurance. But that had limitations. If you had to have an appendectomy the insurance gave you $75. But the doctor charged you $150, so you were stuck. That was no good. Some of the guys I was organizing were making 35 cents an hour, and they couldn't afford that. So we built our own Labor Health Institute with its own doctors [57 of them working part-time by 1951] that handled everything. It was the first prepaid health plan as far as I know, and the employers paid for all of it.' Gibbons' members also got free dental care (except for bridgework and dentures, which they got at cost.) They got free home nursing services, drugs and eyeglasses at cost, and free legal advice. By 1951 they also had pension benefits—at least four years earlier than other Teamsters locals won them.

"When food prices rose rapidly that year, the union opened a non-profit grocery for its members. A few years later, Gibbons persuaded the employers to pay for a recreation center as part of the employee health program. Wholly financed by employers, it had become, by the early '60s, an unparalleled complex that included an indoor swimming pool and gymnasium center for winter recreation and a 300-acre outdoor swimming, camping, tennis and golfcourse complex in suburban St. Louis. In short, the workers had the same kind of country-club facilities that their bosses had. 'Many of our members were from the slums,' Gibbons said. 'I saw the health-and-recreation camp as the only way to get their kids some fresh air and a decent place to play in. It was the first time recreational facilities were ever defined as part of a legitimate union health plan that the employers
could pay for. For the members and children who were black, it was the only decent place they could go, because everything was segregated in those days.'

"Gibbons fought segregation in St. Louis. 'We used the union as a social force.' In January of 1952, two years before the Supreme Court's decision striking down school segregation, Gibbons published a union plan for the desegregation of St. Louis's public schools. At the time, public schools were required by the Missouri constitution to be divided by race. 'It was just plain common sense. But what a reaction the fuckin' thing got,' Gibbons recalled. One St. Louis resident called it 'a Russian booby trap,' in a letter to a local newspaper. When the civil-rights struggle in the South opened on other fronts in the middle '50s, Gibbons thrust 688 into the battle headlong; 'If you were black you couldn't get into a theater anywhere in the city of St. Louis except in the black community,' he recalled. 'And you couldn't find anywhere outside the black community for a black woman to eat or go to the john when she was shopping. Our Local 688 led that whole goddamn fight. We picketed the theaters. We broke 'em down. We went down and sat in restaurants while we were in drug stores. We raised hell. We busted the city wide open.'

"Civil rights was not the only social and political front into which Gibbons threw his union's muscle. A system of 'community stewards' was established to put Teamsters power to work in the neighborhoods. In each ward with more than twenty-five Local 688 members, a community steward organized meetings where members expressed themselves about garbage collection, street lights and other local services, and pressured officials to take action. As Gibbons explained it, 'If, let's say, we needed a playground in that neighborhood, we'd have the steward get all our members in that neighborhood together and start raising hell. We'd call a meeting, and you know when you're talking about a playground it isn't just for Teamsters members. So our guys would get every goddamn neighbor to go to the meeting, too. In the 24th Ward, which was our best ward, we'd have 1,500 or 2,000 people, when the ward committee man might get 150 to his meetings. He'd die. And you know he'd listen to us.'

"The union tackled citywide issues as aggressively as it did neighborhood service problems: 'The streetcar companies were raising their fares and cutting back on service. Well, we have an initiative deal in Missouri where you can get up petitions and put something on the ballot. I mobilized the membership to sign petitions, and we got enough to put it on the ballot. The result is we socialized the goddamn transit system. . . . We now have a bistate agency that runs all the busses. . . . When a private company fucked up the sewerage system in the county, we went out and got all the signatures necessary and got a metropolitan sewer district—established strictly on the basis of 688's activities. . . .'

This picture of Local 688 in the early years of Gibbons's ascendancy
provides a glimpse of what a union might be which insisted on facing community as well as workplace issues, which explicitly organized the class as opposed to this or that segment of workers, and which, in so doing, began to transcend the apparent limitations of unionism and to function as a political party.

Something like this is envisioned by the Marxist organizers within the Teamsters who speak of returning the union to class struggle militancy. The objective tendency relied on to bring that change about is “the employers’ offensive.” Now, it makes good sense to follow Marx in supposing that as industries (truckdriving included) become more capital-intensive, and as the world economy gradually tilts toward publicly owned, centrally planned economies, employers in the United States will demand more surplus value, more productivity. What is much less clear is that this tendency is likely to radicalize the union as an institution. Surely, we will increasingly see unions roused to battle to defend gains of the past which they had supposed secure. But this is militancy, not radicalism. To suppose that “the employers’ offensive” in itself will make unions something other than the cumbersome, parochial, bureaucratized entities they so obviously are, is like the vision that fascism would bring about socialism.

I should like to speak from my own experience about a somewhat different scenario whereby the struggle for democracy in unions might transform itself into a struggle for democracy in the society at large.

Whatever else it produces, the struggle for democracy, decency, and elementary rights in unions is likely to yield:

1. A network of friends, that is, persons who will respond more readily and effectively to the next crisis than if their common struggle within the union had not occurred.

2. Local bases of power, such as control of a number of local unions, which tend to legitimize a next effort because erstwhile rank and filers now speak from the president’s chair and on official stationery.

Even these modest achievements may come at a great price. The more oppressive the union, the greater the temptation to forget that the employer is the main oppressor. American labor law offers the extraordinary worker far more tools and freedoms with which to combat his or her union, than to engage the company. Union politics can become a sandlot wherein workers vent frustrated energy against one another. Too, even local union office makes one part of the system. The reformer who becomes local union president is expected to deliver for the rank and file to a degree which the power of both the company and the international union over the local make impossible. These contradictions place strain on the very comradeship
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which it is the principal purpose of all this blood and tears to bring into being. Let two close friends in a rank-and-file movement decide by lot which of them will run for the local union presidency and which will remain on the shop floor; they can count themselves lucky if a year hence the latter, whoever it turns out to be, is not denouncing the former as a sellout.

But suppose, nonetheless, that the principal product of the struggle within the union is a group, with some small victories to its credit, some local union offices to legitimize its existence, and the beginnings of a point of view. What next?

For what it is worth, in my own experience the only objective situations in which I have seen working-class Americans naturally and organically begin to consider essentially Socialist ideas is when an industry decides to leave town. No doubt it is a localized version of the Depression of the 1930s. The authority to rule of local businessmen and politicians comes into question. Questions are asked: Who gave the X company the right, suddenly and unilaterally, to decide to leave? Why don't we buy the damn place? Slogans emerge (I am quoting the signs at the picket line December 29 against closing the Brier Hill mill in Youngstown): “People not profit.” “Save Our Valley.”

The existing union structures cannot handle a crisis of this kind. Bargaining about investment decisions is beyond their experience, and seems faintly un-American. For the big international union even the loss of 5,000 members is a relatively minor setback, readily made up by recruiting another 5,000 elsewhere. The official union, in a situation of this kind, attends to orderly funeral arrangements: who will get what kinds of benefits when.

Therefore “the group,” ensconced in the local union offices which it took over in its union reform phase, begins to function as the actual union leadership of the area. The benefit approach is rejected. “First we try to save our jobs. Then, if we fail, it’ll be time to talk about benefits.” Community activists recognize in this newfound rank-and-file muscle the only practical hope of getting the corporation to change its mind. Thus the union reformers assume de facto direction of a broader coalition including church groups, some of the political leadership, and other local unions and local rank-and-file groups. Meantime internal union politics loses some of its glamor, for the question is whether there will be any union at all next year. And the most pragmatic member will be found agitating, not for a change in the department’s incentive pay rate, but to “Keep Our Mill Open.”

I am suggesting that rank-and-file rebellion moves on to radicalism when, by one route or another, it comes up against the control of investment decisions. Every industry presents this issue in some form. Thus truckdriving, phenomenologically so different from making steel, has its own version of investment decisions. Weak companies force drivers to stay on the road
longer, drive faster, and if they fail, are merged by means opaque to the ordinary employee. Indeed, the perspective of “the employers’ offensive” has in mind just such practices as seeking ever greater productivity.

There is thus no deep divide between the perspective of the Marxists working within the Teamsters, and the outlook I have been trying to suggest. Yet there is a difference. I believe groups like Miners For Democracy or Teamsters for a Democratic Union drift into an expectation that their ultimate objective is to take over and clean up the international union. I believe this perspective to be in error. For this great expectation, union reformers are repaid in broken hopes and inactive co-workers. It would be better, I think, to project much more modest goals. Yes, there can be a “combined development” whereby the impetus of bourgeois revolution carries over into further struggle, but this comes, perhaps, more by the creation of networks of trust and local bases than by illusory takeovers of national institutions. Yes, union struggle can produce its centers of “dual power,” but likely these will be local.

The organizing model I am proposing to Teamster rebels and others is a middle way between the labor strategy of the Old Left and the labor strategy of the New. The Old Left sought to take leadership in national unions. To Old Leftists, like those in District 31 of the Steelworkers union, once you take power in a local the next thing to think about is how to do the same thing in the region, and no sooner is regional office won than the national campaign begins. The New Left, on the other hand, has often disdained even the office of steward, let alone a position on the local union executive board. In a nutshell, I suggest that it is right to run for the offices of steward and local union president, despite the very real compromises involved, and wrong to seek higher position or to control the union on a broader scale. Radicals in local office, according to the view urged here, should think horizontally: they should reach out to their counterparts in other locals of the same international union, and other locals and rank-and-file groups in different unions in the community. Their aspiration, in substance, should be a “parallel central labor union,” or, in rare situations, control of the official central labor body to which all unions in a locality send delegates. Such institutions should be seen as places where rebels in various work settings can meet one another, and educate each other into a consciousness which, because sensitive to the circumstances of all involved, is perforce a class consciousness. Local labor parties or some functional equivalent would be a natural next step.

The foregoing perspective appears to be workable. Since it is not superhumanly demanding in the manner of national campaigns, it permits participants to remain human beings and therefore, to stay involved. I should think any one could make real progress in this direction in any community over a period of, say, five years. Perhaps this middle way offers an opportunity, as the song suggests, to take it easy but take it.