Working Detroit

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Detroit in the post-war era was a union town. But it was also a town of two fundamentally different unions: the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the United Auto Workers.

At the head of each were men who, on the surface, seemed to have much in common. Jimmy Hoffa, head of the Teamsters, and Walter Reuther, President of the UAW, both came from small-town rural backgrounds—Hoffa from Brazil, Indiana, and Reuther from Wheeling, West Virginia. Their childhood homes were both in coal-mining districts, and Hoffa’s father, who died when Jimmy was seven, was a coal miner; Reuther’s father was a beer-wagon driver.

In Detroit, both men played crucial roles in the rise of their respective unions. Both also displayed a singular militancy, with scars to prove it. Each had been severely beaten by police or company thugs during the tumultuous organizing drives of the 1930s, and both had bounced back, giving as much as they got until their unions prevailed.

Neither man smoked. Neither drank. Both immersed themselves in the organizational life of their unions, and their political skills won them a loyal, if not always unanimous following. In the opinion of many neutral observers, when it came to the tactical maneuvering of collective bargaining, each stood head and shoulders above the men they faced on the opposite side of the bargaining table.

As it happened, both Hoffa and Reuther also became intense anti-Communists. But there were fundamental differences between them. Reuther and his brothers, Victor and Roy, were raised in the Socialist tradition of their father’s Brewery Workers Union. Even as they joined the anti-Communist crusade in the post-war era, they continued to espouse a unique brand of “social unionism” that made the UAW a national symbol of progressive reform.

There was considerably less of this social activism in Hoffa’s brand of bread-and-butter unionism. As head of both the Teamsters’ Central States Drivers’ Council and Detroit’s Local 299, he played a crucial role in expelling left-wing leaders in 1941. He thereafter
pursued a dual career as labor leader and businessman, a combination he saw no need to apologize for. "I find nothing wrong with a labor leader having a business," he told government investigators, even "in the same industry that that union has organized." It was, he claimed, the American Way.

Of the many social and political issues that set Reuther and Hoffa apart, none was more telling than their categorically different reactions to organized crime. While Reuther publicly and emphatically opposed the mob, Hoffa just as certainly worked with it.

In Detroit, organized crime was not an issue that Reuther, Hoffa, or any other trade-union leader could ignore. Indeed, the city was notorious for the pervasive influence and power of its gangs, whose profits in gambling and illegal booze grew to enormous proportions during Prohibition. Because of its easy access to Canada, where alcohol was legal, Detroit became a national port-of-entry for bootleg liquor between 1920 and 1933. After Prohibition's repeal, the city's gangs continued to ply the waters between Windsor and Detroit, smuggling people as well as narcotics across this hard-to-patrol border.

Such lucrative trade could hardly escape the notice of public officials. But rather than oppose the heavy trafficking in illegal goods, many politicians became willing partners in the city's crime syndicate—a fact brought out in stunning detail in 1941, when former mayor Richard Reading, Sheriff Wilcox, and Police Superintendent Fromm were convicted of taking bribes from gambling racketeers.

Many of the city's businessmen were also linked with the mob, none more so than Harry Bennett, the dominant executive in the Ford Motor Company between 1932 and 1945. Bennett's Service Department employed hundreds of gangsters as anti-union enforcers, many of them paroled directly from prison to the Ford payroll. Anthony D'Anna, a known mobster allied with the Licavoli gang, held the contract to haul away cars from the Ford Rouge plant. Chester LaMarr of the infamous Black Hand held a part interest in the food-catering concessions at the Rouge; both he and D'Anna also owned Ford dealerships.

Wherever there was money for the taking, gangsters inevitably sought a piece of the action. From their lucrative base in illegal rackets, many mobsters branched out into legitimate business, often beginning in trades closely associated with the transportation and consumption of bootleg liquor—including trucking, hotels, and restaurants. Control over trucking, in turn, made it possible to extort money from dozens of industries where small businessmen depended on motor freight. The repeal of Prohibition, by eliminating the market for bootleg liquor, forced Detroit's mobs still deeper into the economy in search of new "investment" opportunities. With the rise of Detroit's labor movement after 1937, many found what they were looking for in the profitable trade of union racketeering.

By taking control of a union, enterprise gangsters could embezzle dues, steal merchandise from the inside, sell "labor peace" to employers, and pad the union's payroll with gang members and relatives. In-plant gambling operations could be dramatically expanded. As a Committeeman or local officer, a gang member could collect bets while he moved around the plant on union business. The same end could sometimes be achieved through a union official who wasn't a gang member. In return for contributions to his or her next union-election campaign, the officer could help place a gang-member in the maintenance department, providing him with the needed cover to move around the factory—collecting numbers slips, baseball and football bets, and horse wagers.

More often than not, company officials looked the other way. "If management knows that a gambling syndicate put up the campaign dough that elected 'Joe Dice' as UAW Building Chairman," reported one UAW investigator, "to management, all that was okay—hunky dory." Even if they privately frowned on racketeering, managers knew full well "that the whole set-up of gambler plus union officer...would not get too nasty with manage-
ment about shop grievances or speed-ups."

Few of these "Joe Dice" rose very high in the UAW. A lot of autoworkers gambled on the job, but few were willing to tolerate an overly cozy relationship between their local union leadership and management. One notorious petty hood and gambling operator, Carl Bolton, did win election during World War II as Vice President of Ford Local 400, centered in the company's revitalized Highland Park plant. But in 1947 the local's Reuther Caucus dropped Bolton from their slate and forced him from office. When Bolton attempted a comeback the following year, he finished near the bottom of a 15-candidate list, polling only 360 votes in the entire plant.

It was a different matter in the Teamsters Union.

For one thing, truck drivers, unlike autoworkers, did not work together as a compact group. Long-distance drivers in particular were scattered along hundreds of miles of highway, allowing their union officers greater latitude in how they served—or abused—the membership.

Some over-the-road drivers also owned their own trucks, and a few eventually set up their own businesses, buying or leasing additional rigs and hiring a handful of drivers. Compared to the auto industry, class lines in a small-scale, competitive industry like trucking were more fluid and harder to define, and many drivers saw nothing wrong with a union leader dabbling in a little private enterprise on the side—just so he delivered on wages and benefits during negotiations.

A clever operator, backed by sufficient muscle, could sometimes exploit such wide-open standards of conduct and turn a Teamster local into a private racket. One such operator was William Bufalino, President of Teamster Local 985. Bufalino never worked a day as a jukebox service man before becoming President of the Teamsters' "jukebox local." "Before I was in the union," he later admitted to Congressional investigators, "I was on the employers' side," working as both director and lawyer for Detroit's Wurlitzer distributor. Backed by mob money and supported by Hoffa, Bufalino went directly from the company's board room to the Presidency of Local 985 in 1947. Bar owners who did not do business with mob-owned jukebox companies thereafter found a Local 985 picket line blocking beer deliveries to their establishment. Holdouts were frequently bombed.

Hoffa was also adept at using his union position to further his private business deals. In 1949, he and fellow Teamster official Bert Brennan formed Test Fleet Incorporated, a truck-leasing company registered under their wives' names. Initially, they had no trucks to lease and no customers to rent them. But as head of Michigan's Teamsters, Hoffa solved both problems by intervening directly in a strike of owner-drivers against Commercial Carriers, a car-hauling firm with a terminal in Flint.

Gang leader Anthony D'Anna (right) giving testimony at the Kefauver Crime Committee's 1951 Detroit hearings on his business connections with the Ford Motor Company.
The strike began when the company decided to replace the driver-owned trailers with its own rigs; the strike ended when Hoffa ordered the drivers to return to work on the company-owned trucks. Commercial Carriers subsequently rewarded the Teamster boss by loaning Test Fleet $50,000 and leasing its rigs from the Hoffa-owned company.

Similar deals followed in real estate, resort properties, race horses, and trucking companies. When Hoffa negotiated retirement plans, the pension funds set aside under joint union-management administration were sometimes loaned to mob-owned businesses, often with little or no collateral.

Many Teamster locals resisted such encroachments by organized crime. "I belong to the old school of trade unionism," Isaac Litwak, founder and President of Teamster Local 285, once remarked. "I didn't make a profession out of it. I believed in working people. . . . We had a tough fight to keep the Mafia and the Purple Gangsters from taking over the union," he recalled. In the 1930s, when the laundry drivers represented by his local were first organized, "there was a price on my head. I had to sleep in different hotels to keep from getting killed." Despite the pervasive organized-crime presence in the laundry industry and two violent assaults on Litwak, the drivers' local remained clean.

In Hoffa's home Local 299, there were also drivers who challenged his rule. In 1941, the CIO's Motor Transport and Allied Workers Union began to attract dissident support from Teamster carhaulers, sparking a violent raiding war between the two rival organizations. To protect their base, Teamster leaders cancelled all local elections. "If a notice were placed for an election," R.J. Bennett, a local official, acknowledged in private correspondence to national Teamster President Dan Tobin, "it would be a wide-open opportunity for some of our disgruntled members to cause us no end of trouble with this particular branch of the CIO."

But cancelling elections did not prevent the CIO from attracting dissident Teamsters. "The CIO had tougher guys
than any of us expected," according to Dave Johnson, a Business Agent in Hoffa's Local 299. In the fall of 1941, CIO Flying Squadrons began to gain the upper hand in violent street confrontations with their Teamster opponents. "So," Johnson recalled, "Jimmy went to see Santo Perrone."

By Johnson's account, Hoffa enlisted Perrone—a gang leader who sold his strikebreaking "services" to employers—for the added muscle he needed to intimidate the CIO. Hoffa's negotiation of a sizeable wage increase for Teamster drivers also persuaded many dissidents to return to the fold, and by the end of the year, a bloodied CIO had abandoned its raiding campaign on Local 299.

Santo Perrone was no stranger to Walter Reuther and the UAW. But he was certainly no friend. Perrone began his strikebreaking career in 1934 when, as a foundry worker at the Detroit-Michigan Stove Works on East Jefferson Avenue, he organized goon squads to help management break a strike. John Fry, President of Michigan Stove, rewarded Perrone by

Changing the Guard

In the autumn of 1950, Michigan's Old Guard Democrats had little doubt they were witnessing a revolution. "I have just watched Socialism take over the Democratic Party by Communist processes," announced Teamster attorney George Fitzgerald, referring to the Party's tumultuous Wayne County District Conventions. Delegate Nellie Riley was equally alarmed: "Socialists," she publicly warned, "are in complete charge of the Democratic Party machinery."

Rhetorical charges of left-wing subversion came naturally enough to conservatives like Fitzgerald and Riley. Yet exaggerations aside, most observers in 1950 agreed the state Democratic Party would never be the same again. In a bitter struggle for party control, the Old Guard had lost out to a new generation of leaders, and the most visible partners in the new ruling coalition were the Michigan CIO and its largest member union, the UAW.

This transformation of the Michigan Democratic Party was, in many respects, the mirror image of an equally decisive change in the state's Republican Party.

The longstanding Republican leader in Wayne County, AFL attorney Edward Barnard, had held onto power through the 1930s despite the desertion of AFL members to the New Deal Democrats. In 1940, Barnard was finally ousted by the "better element" Republicans, financed and led by Ford executives Harry Bennett and John Gillespie. That same year, one of the state's largest Chevrolet dealers, Arthur Summerfield, led an equally decisive take-over in the Genesee County Republican organization, centered in Flint.

As a result of these parallel events, the auto companies—which had only passively funded Republican candidates in the past—now actively controlled the Party's statewide organization. Automobile dealers paid into a centralized campaign fund, with each expected to contribute in proportion to his sales volume. Money was supposed to come from the contributors' personal funds, but at least seven dealers were fined under the Federal Corrupt Practices Act for illegally taking the money from corporate cash. Their investment paid off handsomely. By 1942, Michigan's Republicans had captured the governorship and both U.S. Senate seats.

The Democratic Party's Old Guard, led by conservative politicians from Detroit's Irish, Greek, and Italian communities, offered no effective counter to this Republican sweep. The CIO therefore resolved to take matters into its own hands by removing the Old Guard from power. "We are not accepting the Democratic Party in Michigan as it now is," explained the CIO News in March, 1948. "Our purpose in going into it is to line up with
its liberal elements and remold the Party into a progressive force.”

In alliance with reform Democrats and the Detroit Federation of Labor, the CIO’s Political Action Committee encouraged hundreds of shop stewards to run for precinct office in the Party’s District Conventions. They swamped the Old Guard’s scattered candidates and gave the liberal coalition two-thirds of the delegates at the statewide convention in 1948. The new Democrats promptly endorsed a platform committed to taxing corporate profits, protecting civil rights, expanding public housing, and improving workmen’s compensation benefits. On this New Deal platform, former Detroit lawyer G. Mennen Williams won his first of six terms as Michigan’s Governor.

The Old Guard was not content, however, to surrender control of the Party. Led by the Teamsters, they counterattacked in 1950 with hundreds of precinct candidates running on forged nomination petitions. Both the Courts and the County Election Board claimed they had no power to invalidate the forged petitions, even those with names of voters who had died or left town years before. CIO organizers therefore took matters into their own hands, forming squads of “bouncers” to bar the fraudulent candidates from the Party’s District Conventions. George Fitzgerald complained bitterly of “storm troopers guarding the doors and the Chairman presiding with a baseball bat,” but when the Teamster candidates were invited to defend their nomination petitions, only a handful bothered. At the state convention that followed, nearly 500 of the 1200 delegates were CIO members.

Following this decisive battle, the Teamsters and the CIO moved in opposite political directions. On the national level, Hoffa led his union into a longterm alliance with the Republican Party—a move many Teamster locals in Michigan later repudiated by rejoining the Democrats. The CIO, in the meantime, helped the revived Democratic Party capture every executive office in the state by 1954.

This Party was not, as many Republicans claimed, a Labor Party in disguise. CIO leaders like Gus Scholle, Roy Reuther, and Helen Berthelot were prominently involved in the Party, but the top leadership positions were held by a wealthy Ann Arbor businessman, Neil Staebler, and the heir to a shaving-cream fortune, Governor G. Mennen “Soapy” Williams. Democratic voting strength, however, was distinctly working class. Even when the Republicans, led by Presidential candidate Dwight Eisenhower, swept the national elections of 1952 with 55 percent of the vote, 73 percent of autoworkers polled in Detroit supported Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic Party’s candidate; 85 percent voted Williams into a third term. Among black and Polish-American autoworkers, Party support was even higher, with more than 90 percent backing Democratic candidates.
his "services." "While it is not proved by judicially admissible evidence," the Crime Committee of the U.S. Senate concluded in 1951, "the inference is inescapable that what Renda, the entirely unequipped college student, was being paid for was the services of his father-in-law, the muscle-man, Santo Perrone."

Judicially admissible or not, the evidence bore the stamp of Perrone's handiwork. In the 14 months immediately following the Company's new contract with Renda, four officers of UAW Local 212 in the Briggs plant were savagely beaten. One, Genora Dollinger, was attacked by assailants who broke into her house and brutally clubbed her in the face as she lay in bed.

Ken Morris was attacked in 1946 after returning home from work and parking his automobile. "I was winding up the car window," he later remembered, "and someone came up behind me and blackjacked me, cracking open my skull. I remember being carried in a stretcher...and my wife crying and saying to a policeman she had just come to Detroit as my bride... The policeman advised her, 'Little girl, you better go back to Nebraska. This is a rough war.'"

It was a war the UAW would eventually win. Far from collapsing, Local 212 elected Morris its President the following year. But even as Local 212 parried these attacks, unknown gunmen set their sights on the union's top leaders. On April 20, 1948, a shotgun blast ripped through the window of Walter Reuther's Detroit home, catching Reuther at point-blank range and nearly severing his right arm. Thirteen months later, a second shotgun attack caught Victor Reuther in his home, tearing open his chest and destroying his right eye.

The police never solved these near-fatal assaults on the Rethers and the officers of Local 212. Many UAW leaders felt they knew why. "We believe that law enforcement agencies were not really interested in solving these crimes," Emil Mazey, Secretary Treasurer of the UAW, later testified in government hearings. "They were paid off by the organized rackets."

Mazey's claims were not without evidence. The police did manage to "lose" the lead pipe and hat found at the scene of Ken Morris's beating, and the principal detective investigating the shooting of Victor Reuther, Albert DeLamieilleure, was later convicted of owning an illegal interest in the Perrone gang's hangout on East Jefferson Avenue. The police "disciplined" the officer by cutting his annual pay $355.

The Perrone connection in all these assaults was apparently proven in 1953 when gang member Joseph Ritchie, in sworn testimony taken by Wayne County's Prosecuting Attorney, said he and two other Perrone henchmen shot the Reuthers. Unfortunately, Ritchie escaped from the Statler Hotel where police were holding him, fled to Canada, and recanted his testimony. The police made no effort to extradite him.

The Reuthers survived their war with organized crime. Jimmy Hoffa, in his dealings with the mob, did not fare so well. In 1975, after serving four years in prison for jury tampering and defrauding the union's pension funds, Hoffa was kidnapped and murdered by the Tony Provenzano mob of New Jersey. By most accounts, Hoffa was killed because he planned to turn against Provenzano and the other gangsters he helped entrench in the Teamsters.

Hoffa's union had long since become an outcast in the labor movement. In 1957, the very year that Hoffa became national President of the Teamsters, the newly reunited AFL and CIO expelled the gangster-ridden union from their ranks.

Mob influence in the AFL, centered primarily in the Teamsters and the east-coast Longshoremen's union, had been a major stumbling block in the Federation's post-war efforts to reunite with the CIO. The first step towards merger had been taken in 1953 when the two organizations signed a no-raiding pact. But CIO leaders needed assurance that a merged AFL-CIO would not include the mob influence evident in several of the AFL's major unions.

AFL President George Meany, by expelling the east-coast Longshoremen in 1953, removed at least one such barrier to merger. The CIO (headed by Walter Reuther after the death of Phil Murray in 1952) had already expelled eleven left-wing unions from its ranks, reassuring the AFL's conservative leaders on that score. Since most AFL affiliates had long since abandoned opposition to industrial unionism, merger negotiations proceeded on the national level without major difficulty, culminating in the formation of a united AFL-CIO in December, 1955. State bodies of the AFL and CIO were given two years to merge their local operations.

The new organization's most pressing task was deciding what to do about the Teamsters, particularly after the U.S. Senate began investigating the union's criminal ties in 1957. The AFL-CIO's Ethical Practices Committee ordered member unions to give the Senate's McClellan Committee their full cooperation, but Hoffa's predecessor, Teamster President Dave Beck, took the Fifth Amendment 140 times. Hoffa was arrested during the hearings for allegedly bribing a federal attorney. Indictments immediately followed charging him with perjury and illegally wiretapping his Business Agents' phones.

"The International Brotherhood of Teamsters," the AFL-CIO sadly announced in the fall of 1957, "has been and continues to be dominated or substantially influenced by corrupt influences." Hoffa in particular had "associated with, sponsored, and promoted the interests of notorious racketeers." That December, the AFL-CIO's national convention delegates voted five to one to expel Hoffa's union.

Unable to block the expulsion on the national level, Hoffa managed to delay the verdict in Michigan, where the Teamster-dominated AFL refused to merge with the Michigan CIO. AFL-CIO President Meany finally broke the logjam in February, 1958, dissolving the Michigan AFL and chartering the newly organized Michigan AFL-CIO.

Twenty-two years after the AFL expelled John L. Lewis and the fledging CIO, the labor movement had been reunited. The product of that reunion, the Michigan AFL-CIO, was now an undeniable force in the state's economy and society, possessing financial, political, and membership resources unimaginable a quarter century before. Much had been gained since 1936.

Yet much had also been lost. Even with the expulsion of the Teamsters, the labor movement's image nationally and in Michigan had been irreparably damaged by the spectacle of labor racketeering. Even acknowledging that the overwhelming majority of union leaders and staff were honest and devoted, it was also apparent that upscale salaries and expense accounts were moving some top leaders into an income bracket and life style that blunted the movement's crusading zeal.

This growing complacency was especially evident when it came to race relations. Even though the AFL-CIO represented the most racially integrated organizations in America, it was apparent that integration had only gone so far in most unions. Discrimination prevailed in most workplaces, and with it, the living and working conditions of black Americans were growing relatively worse, not better.