

Reforming the Teamsters

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Contents

A Nest of Thieves	3
A Model Piccard	5
Teamsters for a Democratic Union	6
Boring from Within	9
Sources	10

Ron Carey began his five-year term as president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Feb. 1, 1992. Carey and his reform slate — heavily backed by Teamsters for a Democratic Union (most of Carey's slate, though not Carey himself, were TDU members) — swept the elections, in a three-way race in which barely a fourth of the Teamsters' 1.5 million members voted — half of them for Carey. The election capped a 17-year struggle to reform the Teamsters, but was made possible only after the government put the union under federal trusteeship (in March 1989) under U.S. racketeering laws. The effort to reform the Teamsters union has been taken as an example by many other union activists who find themselves in corrupt or undemocratic business unions — indeed the foremost advocate of this union reform movement, Labor Notes, is firmly aligned with TDU. The Carey/TDU experience is thus important not only for what it means to members of the Teamsters union, but also as an example of where efforts to reform the business unions are likely to take us.

Although the Teamsters began as a union for drivers of horse-drawn wagons, today they organize anybody they can get dues from — truck drivers, warehouse workers, grocery store clerks, flight attendants, state employees, etc. The Teamsters' International (U.S. and Canada) Executive Board can place local affiliates in receivership for corruption or mismanagement, but otherwise has little authority over Teamster locals. Locals pay \$3.90 a month to the International, the bulk of members' dues stay with locals or with powerful regional boards. About a fifth of IBT members are covered by national contracts, mostly United Parcel Service workers. Teamster benefit plans and grievance boards are controlled by regional Teamsters conferences, most of which remain solidly in the grip of old-guard officers backed by entrenched local union bosses. Regional (conference) officers are elected by local union officers, not by the membership — just as national officers were before the government take-over.

A Nest of Thieves

That the Teamsters was thoroughly corrupt is a truism so well-known that it hardly needs repeating. Three of the most recent six previous presidents went to jail, a fourth died while under indictment for embezzlement, and a fifth led the mob drain the union's pension funds. Carey's predecessor (who has thus far not been indicted for any crime) rigged contract procedures to give his son-in-law the union's printing work. But in recent years mob control of the Teamsters had weakened — whether as a result of repeated prosecutions of mob-affiliated Teamster leaders or because the weakened union (since deregulation the Teamsters no longer control interstate trucking) and its looted pension plan were no longer as attractive as other rackets.

And the extent to which the union is being cleaned up is easily over-stated. To Carey's credit, he has dumped the jets and limousines that symbolized the lavish lifestyle of his predecessors, and also dumped many double- and triple-dipping Teamster officials from the headquarters payroll. (These hardworking piecards simultaneously held down two or more full-time jobs with the Teamsters on the local, regional and national level; when Carey dumped them from the headquarters payroll they were forced to fall back on their second jobs, from which they have become bitter opponents of the Carey regime.) Carey replaced the double-dippers and other opponents with labor activists who support his policies.

In many ways the Teamsters are just as corrupt as ever. Outright control by the mob is, by and large, passe — especially as this sort of corruption invites critical attention from the government

trustees still overseeing the Teamsters. Long-entrenched mob regimes have been ousted from several locals, and other Teamster officers have been ousted for using union treasuries as their personal checking accounts — among them New York Teamster boss Barry Feinstein. (Interestingly, the New York Times and other union officers were unstinting in praising Feinstein as a labor statesman as he was being forced from office.)

But government-run locals have not shown themselves to be notably committed to improving wages or working conditions, or to conserving the members' dues for legitimate union purposes. Instead the government is systematically looting the Teamsters and making the union even more subservient to employers than it was under mob control.

Under the consent decree which old guard Teamsters officials signed to keep themselves out of jail, a three-person Independent Review Board is supposed to investigate corruption charges and recommend appropriate action to the appropriate local, regional and/or "international" union bodies. If the Board isn't satisfied with their action, it has the right to conduct its own hearings and take whatever action it chooses, subject only to appeal to the courts. One board member was appointed by the Teamsters, a second, former judge Frederick Lacey, by the government. The two were supposed to select a third by mutual agreement, but when they couldn't immediately agree the government appointed former CIA and FBI director William Webster to the "neutral" seat — a finer exemplar of dirty tricks and corruption would not be easy to find. Webster sits on the Board of Anheuser-Busch (as well as the Pinkerton Agency) and thus is indisputably a member of the employing class. Worse still, he is not only an employer — he is an employer of Teamsters! So the government has given the bosses the swing vote in deciding "union" policy.

To add insult to injury, the government refused the Teamsters' very reasonable request to limit the amount of money Lacey could soak their treasury for. Having witnessed Lacey's high-spending ways in the two years Lacey oversaw the union as federal trustee, Carey was reluctant to give him a blank check. Lacey charges the union \$385 an hour (about \$775,000 a year, if he works a 40-hour week); Carey, by contrast, makes "only" \$175,000 (after he cut the salary by \$50,000). Carey asked that Lacey be limited to no more than \$50,000 a year in fees, but Lacey demanded and got a minimum fee of \$100,000 plus expenses with no upper limit. Even the highest-paid Teamster bosses never soaked the working members for that much.

Some union reformers (most notably the Association for Union Democracy) have defended the Independent Review Board as necessary to ensure that local and regional officers do not abuse members' rights, though criticizing its cost and the Webster appointment. But having government officials determine union policy, settle union grievances, determine who will hold union office and dictate union rules is corruption of the worst sort. At least the members have somewhat of a chance (however slim) fighting against mobsters and bureaucrats; with the government running their union they are left powerless when the bosses attack.

While Carey has vigorously denounced this government interference, his record of opposing corruption is unimpressive. In one of his last actions in his guise as federal trustee, Lacey vetoed Carey's attempt to appoint one Ronald Miller as international union representative on the grounds that the "appointment would further a racketeering activity — the extortion of the rank and file's right to a democratic union." Despite Carey's reputation as a union reformer, it seems that he is willing to turn a blind eye to harassment of union dissidents when those doing the harassing are his supporters.

Teamster Local 30, in Pennsylvania, is home to newly elected (on the Carey slate) Teamster General Secretary-Treasurer Tom Sever, Miller (local business agent), and Tom Felice, a persistent

critic of the Sever administration. When Felice was laid off from his job, he had to find another job in its jurisdiction in order to maintain his membership. He found a job but Local 30 officers would not sign the necessary paperwork, so Felice lost the job and was forced out of the local. When he sued, the federal judge hearing the case ruled that Sever and Miller “without doubt... acted in bad faith” and forced him from the union through “despicable” “bullying tactics.” Lacey decided that violating rank-and-file rights violated the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (under which the government took control of the Teamsters).

This decision is interesting on at least two counts — on the one hand it nicely illustrates Carey’s disregard for the democratic rights of rank-and-file Teamsters; on the other, it marks a dramatic extension of government power. Under the logic of this ruling, any union dissident whose civil liberties were violated in their unions could turn to federal prosecutors and ask them to bring criminal or civil charges. But at the same time, the logic is easily extended to allow prosecution of union officers and seizure of unions for virtually any violation of government policy — say, refusal to handle non-union goods or honoring a picket line (indeed there is far more precedent for such an interpretation of RICO than to support Lacey’s innovative reading of the law).

A Model Picard

Carey himself is the very model of the picard. He has been a full-time union bureaucrat since 1967, representing United Parcel workers in Long Island. (Though in fairness, Carey got his start in the Teamsters as a UPS driver, unlike that other darling of the union reform crowd, Rich Trumka, who put in only a few months in the mines working a summer job before going on the UMW payroll as a staff attorney.) By all accounts, Carey proved an effective union president, and he got 97.5 percent of his local’s vote for IBT president.

Since taking control of the Teamsters international, Carey has generally argued for a more militant posture — threatening strikes and boycotts in situations where his predecessors might have called for cooperation or concessions. The new administration has promised programs to educate local officials on labor-management cooperation schemes, a major organizing drive, and concerted efforts to involve rank-and-file members in the ongoing fight for a new contract from United Parcel Service (last time around, the Teamsters granted major concessions).

The catch is the word “promised.” Teamster watchers report that the UPS effort has been sidelined by attempts to work through often-hostile local officers, and that very little actual mobilizing work has been done. And the Carey administration is handicapped by a major financial crisis. The old guard spent millions of dollars on court battles to keep themselves out of jail and in office, and millions more on high salaries and lavish perks. They took \$34 million out of the strike fund to cover these deficits. Although Carey has cut spending on officers, legal fees and perks, many of his programs will cost money — and a UPS strike would exhaust the depleted strike fund in only two weeks.

Carey has also pressed for a more powerful International union structure. Where the Teamsters have always been a decentralized federation of largely autonomous locals, Carey’s vision calls for a centralized structure with a powerful president (himself). Carey’s General Executive Board has unilaterally amended the Teamsters’ constitution to give the president the power to appoint the chairperson and other members of the grievance panels that administer the Teamsters’ national contracts. The Teamsters constitution apparently gives the Executive Board the

authority to amend any section of the constitution dealing with contract bargaining, ratification and enforcement on its own authority, without a vote by the membership, although some Teamster officials have challenged this interpretation. Jack Yager, for example, who chaired the policy committee of the Teamsters Central Conference, has declared that he will continue to appoint grievance chairs in the conference and would simply ignore Carey's attempts to assert his power in this area. In response, Carey filed internal union charges against Yager April 23 seeking his removal from office. Carey charged Yager with signing sweetheart deals with Flint Special Services and Wintz Parcel, undermining efforts to "reform" the grievance procedure, and charging unauthorized Central Conference assessments on local unions. Yager has denounced the proceedings as an attempt to silence critics of the new regime.

Clearly the old guard officers and their appointees have done little if anything to defend members' rights through the grievance process (though in part this may be due to problems inherent in trying to resolve these issues through regional and national panels far removed from the actual grievances, rather than on the shop floor through direct action). But at the same time, Carey's effort to pack these panels with his own loyalists is unlikely to do much to empower the rank-and-file. It will, however, greatly strengthen the powers of the central bureaucracy over the lives of working Teamsters — and there may well come a time when rank-and-filers will learn to regret that power (whether exercised by Carey or his successors).

Teamsters for a Democratic Union

Ten of Carey's 14 slate members were TDU members, and TDU handled most of the get-out-the-vote activities. Carey's entire slate was elected, and so TDU now ostensibly controls the Teamsters' executive board. Those TDU activists find themselves in an awkward position — to the extent that they carry out their reform agenda, they must encourage the rank-and-file to be more active and to challenge old guard Teamsters officials. Indeed, TDU is organizing election challenges against several local officers (with mixed results). They are also pressing for changes in local union bylaws in an attempt to ensure fairer election procedures.

This, of course, has the effect of further polarizing Carey's relations with local and regional officials who control the union's pension funds, grievance panels, and most of its contracts. Joint Council 53, for example, recently passed a resolution calling TDU "a cancer eating away at the teamsters' union" and demanding that Carey keep his officers away from locals in its jurisdiction. If Carey and TDU are to revitalize the Teamsters from above, they need the cooperation of those officials — at the very least they need them to stand aside. On the other hand, if they wish to redirect the Teamsters over the long haul, they need to replace old guard officials at all levels. So Carey's administration has moved slowly, trying to woo over as many old guard officials as possible. Although Carey replaced virtually the entire UPS grievance panel, for example, he left the freight grievance panel largely intact.

Some Teamsters have protested the retention of "business as usual" officials who have failed to enforce basic contract provisions for years. But you will be hard-pressed to find such concerns expressed in the TDU newspaper, Convoy-Dispatch. TDU's paper attacks the "half-truths, distortions and outright lies about our International leadership," supports efforts to raise Teamsters dues (or at least the proportion going to the International), backs efforts to shift power from lo-

cals and regions (in the hands of their enemies) to the International (in their hands, at least for the next few years), and praises “this great union of ours.”

TDU’s sudden switch from rank-and-file to operating as the administration caucus in union politics was predictable. Despite efforts in TDU literature to portray itself as a spontaneous response to a series of sell-outs by a mob-ridden union bureaucracy, TDU represented a continuation of efforts by Trotskyists to bore from within the Teamsters union and capture it for their leadership. Members of International Socialists were among the many leftists who sought out jobs in unionized heavy industry in the late 1960s and 1970s as part of a strategy to implant their ideas among the workers. IS ultimately adopted a strategy of deep entryism in which their “socialism” became all-but-invisible as they focussed instead on gaining influence by organizing around short-term reforms.

These borers benefitted from an upsurge of unrest in the Teamsters: steel haulers were demanding their own union, nearly 50,000 wildcat strikers demanded better contracts, and Ralph Nader’s Professional Drivers Council (PROD) was pressing the Teamsters to take on health and safety issues – and soon expanded its focus to corruption and union democracy. With its supporters spread across the country, a dedicated core of activists used to spending long hours on organizational activities and the ability to draw upon IS resources to help get their efforts off the ground, IS members were in a strong position to take charge of this effort and reshape it in their own direction. They began with a single-issue campaign around the 1976 freight contract – and with about three dozen Teamsters (by no means all of them ISers) in 14 cities. But they distributed tens of thousands of leaflets and struck a cord among Teamsters determined to halt their eroding wages and working conditions. TDU was formally organized in the aftermath of this campaign, at a September 1976 meeting in Kent, Ohio. To quote from TDU’s account of the founding convention’s approach:

They rejected the strategy of “dual unionism” or secession from the Teamsters which some other reform groups had advocated... They decided that TDU was not going to confine its activities to the truck drivers and dock workers in the freight industry... Finally, the men and women who founded TDU committed themselves to fight for real democracy in the Teamsters. They demanded that the members have the right to elect everybody from union steward to General President.

The Fraternal Order of Steelhaulers (FASH) had been the most prominent of those advocating secession. They figured they had enough unity among their fellow workers to build a genuine, fighting union if they could just get the Teamster bureaucrats off their backs. Unfortunately, this program brought them up against the Teamsters bureaucrats, the employers (who hardly wanted a militant union), and TDU – which ultimately persuaded them to abandon their efforts to build their own union which could improve their conditions immediately in favor of a long-term (pie in the sky, when you die) boring-from-within strategy of trying to take over the entire International. In 1979, TDU merged with PROD and began lining up local officers, either by signing up existing officers or by electing “reform” candidates.

Those early victories reinforced an already existing tendency to focus on taking over the union offices, rather than building a genuinely democratic, grassroots union (a strategy more easily accomplished outside the Teamsters, of course). In 1980, TDU activist Dave Wolfensohn warned that, “Uncertain that they can spur direct action against the employers, some TDUs have tended

to seek substitutes... In particular, there is a tendency to look to union elections, to alliances with dubious union officials, and to protracted lawsuits.” He saw the original IS strategy as revolving around building a “movement from below” with its own independent existence, not merely serve as a front for the sponsoring party. The TDU structure and newspaper were intended to give this movement coherence and some visibility.

Despite the pivotal role IS has played in building TDU, it would be a mistake to attribute too much importance to IS’s political agenda. While IS has been able to use its position in TDU to push its pet hobby horses and to expand its influence into other unions through the IS-owned-and-operated Labor Notes, in many ways IS remade itself in response to the demands the TDU strategy placed upon it. Originally IS was a fairly open, left Trotskyist party. But Trotskyist politics proved an obstacle to organizing rank-and-file Teamsters (and indeed to IS’s boring from within the labor movement as a whole), and the politics were quickly reduced to attempts to reach out to minority workers and occasional bouts of internationalism (although this can be abandoned when opportunism demands — TDU raised no objections to Carey’s fiercely nationalistic flag-waving, America-first rhetoric).

Even the traditional Trotskyist chimera of the Labor Party was kept out of the TDU program (although IS advocated it fervently in their magazine, Changes (now merged into Against The Current), and in Labor Notes). Instead, TDU and IS have bulled inexorably toward “pragmatic” policies — particularly towards efforts towards electoralism and alliances with “out” officials. IS underwent a split over these issues, and entered a seemingly irreversible decline resulting in large part from its submersion into union reform efforts. IS could not recruit effectively in the unions it operated within for fear of alienating the rank-and-file, but so much of their energy and resources went into boring-from-within that IS by and large ceased to function in the outside world. The result was that IS became increasingly irrelevant to its own members (once the union reform efforts got off the ground they were largely self-perpetuating) and to broader movement politics. And so, a few years ago, IS (after rejecting a proposal to bore from within Democratic Socialists of America and take that organization over) dissolved itself into a new “multi-tendency socialist organization,” Solidarity — which brought former IS members, exiles from the Socialist Workers Party, and freelance Marxists into a looser, but larger organization.

IS’s collapse is of little concern to syndicalists. Far more important is the ways in which its policies diverted Teamster rank- and-file efforts from attempting to build shop-floor resistance to the bosses into the seemingly easier channels of electing “reformers” to union office or revising union bylaws. Over the years TDU had many successes with this strategy — that is, several TDU-backed candidates did in fact become union bureaucrats (and many union bureaucrats made alliances with TDU). With the U.S. government take-over of the Teamsters, TDU was able to follow the logic of this position into the union’s highest levels.

But there is little reason to expect that these TDU Executive Board members will make much difference. As Wolfensohn noted 13 years ago, “Anyone who takes top office... without having first built an independent organization of the rank and file (not just voters) committed to direct action by the ranks... will hold office but not be able to do anything with it.” He pointed to the conservative influence of the entrenched bureaucracy, to the inability to win against the bosses without strong rank-and-file action, and to the sorry results of TDU’s early forays into union elections. TDU won several elections in 1978, only to see the “rebel” bureaucrats quickly assimilated. TDU’s emphasis on working within the Teamsters structure led it not only to reject secession, but also to undermine efforts to build wildcat strikes (instead pressuring the bureaucrats to call official

strikes — even when successful, the bureaucrats controlled the resulting strikes and settled them on their own terms).

TDU relied upon lawsuits, union elections and appeals to union officers instead of organizing the rank and file to act in their own behalf. Efforts by more militant members to broaden this approach were uniformly rejected as irrelevant or likely to scare off potential recruits. TDU's 1981 convention rejected efforts to declare TDU support for the right to strike (even where prohibited by contract), to publish articles in the TDU Convoy Dispatch on direct action tactics such as the secondary boycott, and even defeated a motion to require candidates for union office who run with TDU support to sign a statement saying they would stick by its program. (This motion was prompted by the fact that several dozen TDU Teamster office-holders refused to vote or speak for TDU positions at Teamsters conventions or to otherwise visibly support the movement which helped them into union office).

Today TDU sits atop the Teamsters, but they are having little more success in pursuing their policies. Where local officers genuinely want to put up a fight they can make a difference — primarily by not getting in the way. But few union bosses are interested in restructuring their locals or regionals to give more power to the rank-and-file, or in doing anything else that might endanger their cushy jobs. And many Teamsters locals are totally impervious to change from below — structured in such a way that membership control is inconceivable. Many, perhaps most, Teamsters are members of large amalgamated locals that administer scores of contracts covering workers at different companies in a wide variety of industries, often scattered over vast territories. Members rarely meet Teamsters members outside of their own workplace; even if they were able to mount an effective electoral challenge to the entrenched incumbents (hardly likely under the circumstances), this organizational model separates the “union” local from its membership in ways that are extremely difficult to overcome. But these locals are not run by reformers, they are run by veteran bureaucrats who run their fiefdoms like businesses, collecting the dues (and paying themselves handsomely from the proceeds), making sure the members don't get too uppity, and often undercutting other union locals in their dealings with employers so as to get as many dues-paying members as possible under their umbrella.

Boring from Within

In fairness, TDU never was a syndicalist organization — it aimed not to abolish the capitalist system, but rather to make the Teamsters union a more effective weapon in the battle for a bigger piece of the pie. But it is often pointed to as an example of what revolutionaries might accomplish were we only to switch our efforts from the admittedly difficult task of building revolutionary unions to the seemingly easier route of transforming the business unions from within. In many ways TDU has been successful — the “reformers” have taken control of the highest levels of the “union” (though their control is far shakier at lower levels), even if they have had to make major compromises to do so.

For more than 100 years, syndicalists have debated the merits of boring-from-within and of revolutionary unionism. The borers, originally inspired by their success in capturing control of the French CGT (though that control proved remarkably weak when put to the test — it proved much easier to capture union office than to build genuine working-class organizations), argued that it was necessary to go where the workers were and to work within their existing organiza-

tions to convert these to a more revolutionary position. In practice, this has generally translated into a policy of seeking union office, since business unions are run by their officers and any “pragmatic” attempt to change their direction is thus seemingly easier to direct from the top than from the bottom. Those who rejected this strategy have been denounced as impossibilists, divisive and sectarian.

But nonetheless the majority of the syndicalist movement has always rejected this boring-from-within strategy, recognizing that it is incompatible with our basic principles, and ineffective to boot. Instead we have argued for building revolutionary unions. The boring from within strategy necessarily implies that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the business unions — that with a change of officers or a little tinkering with the bylaws they could be made into effective working-class organizations. But revolutionary unionists know that nothing could be further from the truth.

The business unions are based upon fundamentally flawed premises — that labor and management, at some basic level, have interests that can be harmonised, and that workers are incapable of running their own unions. While we support workers — whether members of business unions or not — whenever they find themselves engaged in the class war, we recognize that the business unions are organized not to prosecute the class war but rather to smooth over disputes. They are dues-collecting machines, whose continuity and stability rely upon a passive membership and industrial peace. The prized accomplishments of business unionism — their cadres of full-time union officers, their mandatory dues check-off, their national arbitration procedures, government-certified union representation — are directly contrary to the real interests of the workers whose dues support the business unions, and indeed were developed precisely to circumvent workers’ control of their own organizations.

Revolutionary unionists propose a fundamentally different concept of unionism — one based upon the workers themselves, organized at the point of production. We recognize that anti-hierarchical, democratic organizations cannot be built within hierarchical organizations — let alone from the hierarchy itself. Revolutionary unionism requires that we develop new ways of pursuing our struggles and our vision for the future — one based on direct action and self-organization.

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