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The Business Unions Can Not Be Reformed

Libertarian Labor Review

1998

Shortly before we went to press Teamsters president Ron Carey stepped down amidst a growing scandal about his administration's embezzlement of union funds to finance his re-election campaign. Carey was elected atop a reform slate heavily backed by Teamsters for a Democratic Union, which waged a long struggle to rid the Teamsters of mob control and undemocratic rule by a handful of bureaucrats who lived lavishly off the Teamsters treasuries. The Carey-TDU slate took charge of the union with the backing and under the aegis of U.S. government-appointed trustees; today the government has withdrawn its sponsorship and a government-appointed former FBI agent once again has full control over union finances. (We discussed at some length Carey's at-best mixed record as a labor reformer in *LLR* #20, and critiqued TDU's strategy and limitations in #15.)

No worker should feel the slightest sympathy for Ron Carey and his cronies. Carey is a life-long union bureaucrat who has not hesitated to use his bureaucratic power to stifle dissidents and to centralize power into his own hands. Where mobster-run locals

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Retrieved on 27th January 2021 from syndicalist.us
Libertarian Labor Review #22, Winter 1997-'98

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backed Carey's administration, he proved more than willing to turn a blind eye to their assaults upon not only the rights but also the bodies of their members. And when he found himself falling behind in his re-election campaign against the Jr. Hoffa forces (Hoffa was lavishly funded by the corrupt local piecards hiding behind his name, and much of his money was almost certainly stolen from union coffers as well), he did not hesitate to raid the Teamsters treasury of what authorities report was at least \$735,000 – laundered through a variety of labor and “progressive” organizations en route to Carey's re-election campaign (though much of the money appears to have been skimmed off in the process).

The scandal continues to spread. Citizens Action has had to close its national office, and the head of the “progressive” telemarketer Share has stepped aside and may yet be moving to a federal jail cell. AFL-CIO President John Sweeney is so far rejecting pressure to dismiss AFL Secretary-Treasurer Rich Trumka (the darling of the labor reform set); \$150,000 of Teamsters members' dues reportedly passed through Trumka's hands as part of the scheme.

Carey has been barred from running for re-election, and forced to step down from his post. He may yet be expelled from Teamsters membership by a government-controlled review board and/or prosecuted for embezzlement of union funds. The Teamsters “reform” forces are in disarray, desperately searching for some other union bureaucrat who might stand a chance against Jr. Hoffa in next year's election (though reformers are asking the government to ban Hoffa from standing for office as well). Indeed, the “reformers” don't seem to recognize what has hit them. Shortly after the scandal broke, but before Carey was disqualified, TDU cochair Mike Ruscigno told *Labor Notes*, “This is our chance to drive a stake through the heart of the old guard.” And the bankruptcy of the “labor reformer's” strategy of trying to revitalize and reform the unions by capturing the top offices, relying on the government to lend a hand, is ever more clear.

Ironically, much of the labor “left” is supporting Carey. The once-Trotskyist Workers World Party had practically elevated Carey to the status of a class war prisoner, claiming that his removal is in retaliation for the Teamster’s “victory” in the United Parcel Service strike. (For a critique of the UPS settlement see the October 1997 *Industrial Worker*, their December issue had a detailed account of the Carey scandal and its causes.) The Association for Union Democracy, which long supported rank-and-file Teamsters in their battle against precisely this sort of abuse of power and looting of union funds, labelled Carey’s election “probably the most democratic in the recorded history of the labor movement.” (The IWW holds more democratic elections every year.) Even those who criticize the Carey campaign’s theft of union funds typically portray it as an aberration — a tragic and ironic episode in Carey’s quest to reform the Teamsters union ignoring the fact that this looting was possible only because rank-and-file Teamsters have little more control over “their” union than they did when it was a wholly owned subsidiary of the Mafia.

Building a fighting labor movement can not be accomplished by capturing positions in the union bureaucracy. While it is much easier to gain union office than to build genuine working-class organizations, boring from within the business unions makes sense only if one assumes that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with them — that with a change of officers or a little tinkering with their bylaws, they could be transformed into effective working-class organizations.

Nothing could be further from the truth. 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. Anarcho-syndicalists recognize that no lasting gains can be wages within this framework — instead, what is needed is a fundamentally different unionism based upon the workers ourselves, organized at the point of production. Electing better bureaucrats accomplishes very little. We need

to build rank-and-file organizations on the shop floor, relying on direct action and self-organization to improve our conditions, and to lay the groundwork for a fundamental transformation of our unions and our society.