

# What Next for the Teamsters?

In the recent election for union leadership, members of the Teamsters union were confronted with a choice. On the one side stood Jimmy Hoffa Jr., the incumbent president, who campaigned on the basis of forming a “partnership” with the employers and whose family has had long-standing relations with organized crime. On the other side stood the challenger, Tom Leedham, who has pressed for mobilizing the membership to act in their own interests and strike, if that proves necessary, in order to win gains.

## The Election

Only 21 percent, or 294,000 Teamsters voted in the November election. This is the lowest turnout since the rank-and-file first won the right to vote on March 13, 1989. Hoffa received 65 percent of the votes cast and Leedham 35 percent, roughly equivalent to the 2001 elections. One of the most striking facts of the election was that, according to documents filed with the Election Supervisor, Hoffa outspent Leedham by \$2,000,997. Yet only 13 percent of the overall membership voted for Hoffa, leaving 80 percent completely unmoved by the large amounts of pro-Hoffa propaganda.

The lack of involvement of the vast majority of the members is a testimony to Hoffa's failed leadership. His “partnership” with the bosses has necessarily resulted in a series of concessionary contracts where workers have found themselves on the losing side of the bargain. The employers have simply insisted that in order to remain in business, they must be competitive which in turn means lowering production costs to a minimum, including labor costs. Instead of recognizing that workers and their employers have diametrically opposed interests, which means that workers can gain only at the expense of the employers, and that workers must be mobilized to fight for their own interests, Hoffa has demobilized the rank-and-file and in the process has entirely demoralized much of the membership.

## James Hoffa Jr.

James P. Hoffa, of course, has name recognition. His father, James R. Hoffa, was a scrapper, organizing his first strike when he was only 19 in 1932. But he also carried through a “partnership with the bosses” approach to trade unionism. If the elder Hoffa had followed Farrell Dobbs and others in rejecting a class *collaborationist* policy, and instead adopted a class *struggle* policy, the whole trade union movement could be different, es-

pecially following WWII when a massive wave of workers' and soldiers' strikes began to take place. Hoffa did not follow this road, and despite attempts by the current Teamster union officialdom to paint Hoffa as some kind of labor saint, the majority of the members still view Hoffa Sr. as the scoundrel he really was.

James P. Hoffa, the current president of the Teamsters, was born May 19, 1941. He joined the Teamsters at 18 and was a Teamster Lawyer from 1968 to 1993. At a recent Teamster Labor Day rally in Detroit, George W. Bush described Hoffa Jr. in these terms: “You've got a good man running the Teamsters in Jimmy Hoffa. Let me tell you another thing about Jimmy Hoffa. He's running a good union and in an aboveboard manner. And make no mistake about it, people are beginning to notice, particularly in Washington, D.C.”

How has Hoffa managed to gain such trust from the big business party of Bush? Aside from bargaining generous contracts for the employers at the expense of Teamster workers, over the past eight years, Hoffa has launched the biggest dues increase in Teamster history. Members in the western pension fund have seen pension cuts of 25 percent, while members of the central states' pension fund have seen 30 percent cuts.

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Membership in the union has actually dropped by 155,000. And although the dues increase has raised an extra \$525 million, only 3.3 percent of this goes to the Teamster strike fund, and only 2.2 percent of the dues go to the international's organizational fund. This is just the very tip of the iceberg, but it can be seen that the class collaborationist policy followed by Hoffa and the Teamster “old guard” has grown so close to the bipartisan government of the employers that even some of the most anti-union politicians are singing the praises of Hoffa.

## UPS and the Teamsters

The next nationwide conflict between workers and the capitalist class may very well be with the Teamsters and United Parcel Service (UPS). The contract with UPS expires August 1, 2008 and early



The victorious UPS strike of 1997 was a point of reference for the entire U.S. working class

negotiations began this past October. The highest percentage of Teamsters that work for a single employer are at UPS, which includes 215,000 Teamsters there. In 2002, Hoffa negotiated a contract that he described as the “best contract ever,” but for many it appears to be the worst contract ever.

For example, Local 804 in New York, the largest UPS local in the East, has just recently had a 30 percent cut in members' pensions, a fact that was kept quiet from the rank-and-file until November 30, a day after the local and international elections. Moreover, this 30 percent cut in the pensions was implemented two months after the union had agreed to the company's request to open the contract negotiations early. Union officials claim they are going to protect the pensions in the current negotiations, but this past performance does not bode well for the future.

Since UPS is today making record profits and aims to make even more at the expense of UPS Teamsters, the time has come to implement an alternative strategy that will mobilize the membership to stop the UPS concessionary drive dead in its tracks. The union must put up a real fight to win concessions from the company, not give up concessions to it. In a future article we will deal with the developments at UPS and the Teamsters in more detail.

## TDU

Teamsters for a Democratic Union was formed in 1976 because of the incredible level of corruption within the union. It has played a crucial role in Teamster history for the last 30 years, helping the rank-and-file win the right to vote and playing a critical role in helping Ron Carey of Local 804 in New York to capture the presidency from the old guard for the first time in Teamster history. Car-

ey's administration implemented many reforms throughout the 1990s, including eliminating multiple salaries for union bureaucrats, organizing 20 Overnite terminals, and leading the first successful strike in decades in this country against UPS. The conflict with UPS proved once again that strikes are still an effective weapon against the employers when they are led by those who actually intend to use the strike to win.

The problem with TDU is that its leaders have a class collaborationist outlook. They recognize some of the problems the Teamsters union faces but lack any plan for the rank-and-file to actually take power. It is not merely a question of the union lacking democracy. It is not enough to simply be an advocate of rank and file democracy for the union. The most essential element that is required is recognition that the current union officials' policy of a "partnership" with the bosses makes it impossible for the union to mount an effective defense of workers' interests against the employers' attacks.

However, more and more workers are recognizing that the fantasy that there exists a community of interests between the employers and workers is a self-destructive policy. The fact that over 100,000 members voted for Leedham indicates that there is an instinctive left-wing within the Teamsters union, which, if organized around a program of struggle against the bosses' attacks could develop into a conscious, class-struggle tendency, especially in response to the ongoing pension and health care cuts.

Edna Bonacich, a professor at the University of California, Riverside and a specialist in supply-chain issues puts the power of the trucking industry this way: "There's a vulnerability there. If any group in this supply chain were to go on strike, it would cost the companies millions. A coordinated strike could cost them billions." The Teamsters are the traditional organization for workers in the trucking industry, and even if we are now only a fraction of that industry, the potential is there to cause a major disruption to capitalism and to give the working class as a whole a sense of their true power.

We must wage a relentless struggle against the strategy of forming a partnership with the bosses, since such an orientation has always been followed at the expense of workers' standard of living. We must urge our co-workers to organize independently of their employers and independently of the Democratic Party which is tied to big business just as much as the Republicans. When we are organized and mobilized to fight, workers wield tremendous power. After all, capitalism cannot exist for one day if workers refuse to go to work.

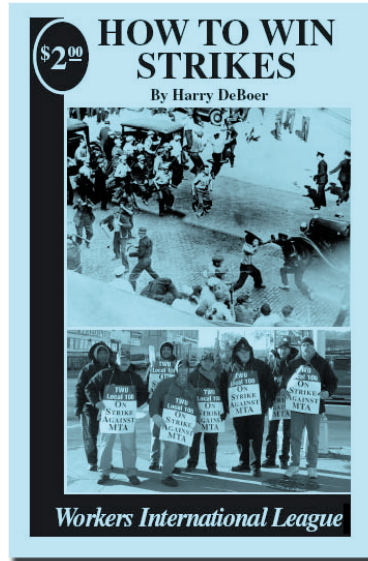
*A West Coast Teamster*

# How to Win Strikes

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Harry DeBoer was born in 1903 in Crookston, MN. In the early 1930s he began working in the coal yards in Minneapolis and became part of the initial organizing committee that led the famous Teamsters' truckers strike in 1934. DeBoer is credited with developing the "cruising pickets", a tactic that successfully stopped scab trucks.

DeBoer remained true to his principles throughout his life, and in his later years counseled many young trade unionists on labor issues and strike strategy. The following essay captures with crystal

clarity the lessons that DeBoer and his revolutionary comrades learned from years of experience. It serves as a beacon of light for the working class today in its struggle to abolish exploitation and establish a genuinely free society.

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