

Rank-and-File Rebellion

Teamsters for a Democratic Union



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VERSO

London - New York

0403692X
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First published by Verso 1990
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Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1V 3HR
US: 29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001-2291

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

La Botz, Dan

Rank and file rebellion : Teamsters for a democratic union.

1. United States. Road freight transport services. Trade unions: International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen, and Helpers of America. Leaders. Disputes with members, history

I. Title

331.87

ISBN 0-86091-289-2

ISBN 0-86091-505-0 pbk

US Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

La Botz, Dan

Rank and file rebellion : Teamsters for a Democratic Union / by Dan La Botz

p. cm. — (Haymarket series on North American politics and culture)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-86091-289-2. —ISBN 0-86091-505-0 (pbk.)

1. International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen, and Helpers of America—History. 2. Teamsters for a Democratic Union—History. I. Title. 2. Series.

HD6515.T3L3 1990

331.88'11388324'0973—dc20

Typeset by NorthStar,
San Francisco, California
Printed in USA by The Alpine Press Inc.

HD6515
T3L3
1990
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conferences. But perhaps most important, they brought their idealism and dedication to building a grass-roots movement.

Fitzsimmons and Presser seized upon the presence of a few socialists like Friedman in an attempt to discredit TDU. 'When we were organizing TDU', Friedman remembers, 'somebody who was sent in would stand up and say, "They say you're a Communist?" Or, "Isn't it true that you're a Communist?" And I would handle that in a very straightforward way, saying, "Look, TDU is not a Communist or a Socialist organization. It's an organization of Teamsters. I personally may be a socialist, and if you want to talk about my politics, I'll be happy to talk to you *after* this meeting. That's not what this meeting's about, and that's not what we're here to take up." And I would often go up to them afterwards and say, "Do you want to know about my politics?" And they were gone. They did not want to hear that. That was not why they said it. They said it for the purposes of disruption.'

At first the attacks by Presser and other union officials had a damaging impact on TDU. They encouraged some union officials to engage in physical assaults on TDU members, and several such attacks occurred. They encouraged the employers to fire and otherwise victimize TDU activists and other outspoken union members. But worst of all, they frightened some rank-and-file members and kept them from reading TDU literature or coming to TDU meetings. It took a long time for TDU to overcome the red-baiting and win the confidence of the rank and file.

It would have been easier for TDU to have denied the presence of socialists in the organization, or to have excluded certain political groups or beliefs from the organization. But TDU's members were well aware that whatever their political views, and certainly most of them were Democrats and Republicans, they would all be called Communists in any case. The word *Communist* had little or nothing to do with an individual Teamster's political beliefs and was simply intended to stigmatize and isolate the reformers. The TDU leadership also decided that excluding socialists would establish a dangerous precedent, for if socialists had to lie and hide today, some other group might have to lie and hide tomorrow. Moreover, the few socialists in TDU were dedicated members, and were generally respected and trusted by the others. In an editorial in *Convoy* by the National Steering Committee entitled 'Why They Fear the Truth', TDU responded to the attacks: 'TDU would like to set the record straight. As anyone knows who has read our program, TDU is not about socialism or dual unionism. It is about returning our union to the rank and file.' The TDU Steering Committee did not deny 'the presence of a handful of socialists in the TDU membership', but argued that the union officials harping on that issue was 'a repeat of the old company tactic of red-baiting.' The editorial pointed out that 'TDU is open to all Teamsters, and independent of any political organization'. TDU concentrated on the issues of union democracy, union

contracts, and the 'big task, reforming the most powerful and autocratic union in the USA.'¹ This forthright way of dealing with criticism was used by TDU's leaders and members in countless conversations with their fellow workers and union members.

Things went beyond mere verbal attacks. The Teamsters leadership also moved to eliminate from the union the two most prominent TDU leaders. In February 1977 Pete Camarata and Al Ferdnace, both leaders of the Detroit TDU chapter, were charged with interfering with the union's responsibility to carry out its contractual obligations – in reality for supporting a strike by car haulers – and then on 28 March they were expelled from Local 299. The Detroit TDU chapter swung into action to save two of its best-known members. TDU immediately got a temporary restraining order in federal court reinstating Camarata and Ferdnace. As the same time, TDU activists circulated throughout the city distributing leaflets and organizing rallies at the hearings to defend them. With the rank and file putting on the pressure, Local 299 dropped the charges against Ferdnace. Then TDU appealed Camarata's expulsion to Michigan Joint Council 43, where the expulsion was reversed and Camarata was found innocent of all specific charges. Camarata's reinstatement was not simply a legal victory, but a victory for the TDU chapter, which had mobilized in their defense.

Camarata was brought up on union charges once again, this time by International organizer Larry McHenry in March 1979. He was accused of fomenting a wildcat strike and put on 'life-time probation' by officials of Local 299, most of whom were subsequently voted out of office. When TDU attorney Ann Curry Thompson prepared to go to court to challenge the frame-up, the Teamster attorneys persuaded McHenry to drop the charges.

As if the attacks by the Teamster officialdom were not enough, another group got into the act. A group calling itself the US Labor Party began handing out literature at highway offramps and busy intersections in several big cities supporting Frank Fitzsimmons and the Pressers and attacking TDU and PROD. The US Labor Party, headed by Lyndon LaRouche, who has since been convicted of fraud, had a reputation for advocating fascism and using physical violence against welfare rights organizations, labor unions, and political opponents. Alexander E. Barkan, national director of the AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education (COPE) called LaRouche and his organization 'anti-labor, anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic and anti-minorities.'² The United Steel Workers' newspaper, *Steel Labor*, had characterized the group as having 'the makings of a fascist movement.'³ Nonetheless, several Teamster officials warmly welcomed these neo-Nazis. In his *Lyndon LaRouche and the New American Fascism*, Dennis King wrote that 'LaRouche emissaries in the late 1970s dealt with Teamster officials on all levels, from the local and joint councils up to the general executive board and the office of then IBT General President Frank Fitzsimmons.'⁴

LaRouche and his followers performed many services for Teamster officialdom, acting as spies for the Teamsters, infiltrating PROD and preparing a 32-page report on the organization for Fitzsimmons. They also produced propaganda pamphlets such as *The Plot to Destroy the Teamsters*, which attacked TDU and PROD with the preposterous claim that the Teamster reformers were part of a conspiracy involving President Carter, the Rockefeller, Ralph Nader, the CIA, the AFL-CIO, and others. One piece of US Labor Party literature claimed that 'Illegal Drug Traffic Finances TDU/PROD'. Jackie Presser increasingly adopted the LaRouche line, and his charges against TDU got wilder and weirder.

In order to convince the rank and file that TDU was Communist, the US Labor Party and Teamster officials produced phony TDU posters, leaflets and letters. One such forgery was a bogus TDU poster inviting Teamsters to a May Day parade to March for Communism. Another was a counterfeit letter supposedly from the anti-union Right to Work Committee endorsing Pete Camarata. LaRouche followers also worked to elect incumbent officers who were challenged by reform candidates. In Local 282 they supported John Cody, a four-time convicted felon and friend of Mafia boss Carlo Gambino, and Harold Gross, a former associate of Murder, Inc. and mob leader Santos Trafficante. In Local 705 they worked for International Vice-President Louis Peick producing smear literature to defeat a reform group.⁵

At the same time, Teamster officials were hospitable to the LaRouche organization. In Local 126 in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, Secretary-Treasurer Donald F. Wetzel sent out a mailing of US Labor Party literature to union members, while officials of Teamster Local 641 in Jersey City allowed the group to set up a display at a union meeting. Around the country Teamster officials worked closely with LaRouche's fascists.

TDU responded to this new attack by sending a letter to Fitzsimmons demanding that he stop the distribution of US Labor Party literature by Teamster officials. In January 1978 the Teamster General Executive Board adopted a resolution disclaiming any association with the US Labor Party and denying that it had provided any funds to the group. Despite Fitzsimmons's disclaimer, however, the US Labor Party continued to be active in and around the union, turning up in Teamster locals in Long Island, Oklahoma City, Flint, Harrisburg, Denver, Grand Rapids, St. Louis and Kansas City. In some areas US Labor Party members acted as campaign managers for Teamster officials.

Ironically, the involvement of the US Labor Party seemed to harm some of the Teamster officials associated with it and may have actually hurt their election campaigns. And despite the propaganda barrage, it was Fitzsimmons and Presser, the heads of a one-party dictatorship, whom the ranks frequently compared to Communists.

Teamster officials also physically attacked TDU meetings. When TDU

held an educational meeting for rank-and-file Teamsters in Grand Rapids, Michigan on 28 March 1981, Michigan Teamster officials mobilized some sixty paid officials including business agents and joint council organizers from all over the state to attempt to disrupt the meeting. Among the leaders of the goon squad was convicted extortionist Roby Smith, a Michigan joint council organizer. The Teamster leadership received help from US Senator Orrin Hatch, who issued a press release alleging that there were subversives in the United Mine Workers, the United Steelworkers and the Teamsters union. Teamster officials assisted by the US Labor Party in turn used the Hatch press release in an attempt to smear TDU. A rumor was also circulated that the Senate Labor and Human Resource Committee, chaired by Hatch, was planning to investigate TDU, and stories to that effect were placed in various Teamster newspapers. The man responsible for the rumor was Richard Leebove, a former candidate of the US Labor Party and employee of Bobby Holmes, Sr., International vice-president and head of Local 337.

When Jackie Presser became Teamster general president in April 1983, he created his own praetorian guard, called BLAST, the Brotherhood of Loyal Americans and Strong Teamsters. BLAST was in fact simply a union goon squad created and funded by Jackie Presser for the sole purpose of attacking TDU. BLAST first appeared at the June 1981 Teamster convention in Las Vegas, where it distributed literature claiming that TDU-PROD was made up of 'subversive-fanatic-terrorists'. Later, when Bobby Holmes, Sr. faced a TDU challenge in elections in Local 337, he brought the BLAST organization to Michigan. Roadway, one of the biggest trucking companies in the country, was so impressed by BLAST's literature that the company circulated it nationwide.

When Presser found that accusing TDU of being Communist was no longer effective he began to accuse TDU of being capitalist. Presser and the Teamster leadership claimed that TDU was supported by big business. The argument was that the financial support TDU had received from charitable foundations was really support from corporations. In reality, TDU received financial support from charitable foundations that also supported other progressive causes such as civil rights groups, women's organizations and other labor unions. The trucking corporations' hatred for TDU was too well known for the charge of corporate support of TDU to be credible.

TDU's biggest problems came not from the antics of the US Labor Party, but from the employers who denied TDU activists the right to distribute literature on company property or use the bulletin boards. They gave TDU members disciplinary letters and suspensions and even fired them because of their union activities. Some companies like Roadway and United Parcel Service were particularly flagrant in the violation of their employees' rights to what the law calls 'protected concerted activities', but many companies engaged in this kind of harassment and intimidation. Frequently, local union

officials colluded with the company to victimize TDU members.

The firings had what lawyers call 'a chilling effect'. Teamsters who were attracted to TDU by its ideas and its activities were afraid to join TDU, while many rank and filers became afraid even to exercise their rights as union members, such as filing grievances or attending union meetings. TDU and its attorneys were able to defend successfully many of those who were disciplined or fired, and deterred the companies to some degree by winning some substantial financial settlements. Harold 'Yogi' Baer, for example, was fired by Mason-Dixon Lines on 22 September 1976, supposedly because of wage garnishments. In reality Baer was an active union member who had filed many grievances against the company's attempt to impose a 'combination barn', which would have destroyed the established work rules. He had also fought the union over the issue of the members' right to choose their own steward. Moreover, he was a TDU member.

When Baer was fired, TDU attorney Steve Saltzman filed a complaint on Baer's behalf with the National Labor Relations Board. In his decision, Administrative Law Judge Russell M. King, Jr. found that there was a 'conspiracy between Horta [the Local 407 Business Agent] and Schnellberger [the Mason-Dixon terminal manager] to rid themselves of a troublesome employee and dissident union member. 'I find and conclude', wrote King, 'that the vast majority of the officers and officials of not only Local 407, but the Teamsters as a whole in Ohio were opposed to TDU and its members, supporters and activities.' Consequently, King said, 'I think the deck was stacked against Baer from the beginning. ... In the hearing before the Joint Local Committee, I find little, if any, resemblance of traditional fairness and due process.' On 7 March 1978, after eighteen months off the job, Baer was reinstated with full back pay of approximately \$30,000.

'Yogi' Baer's case was one of the biggest NLRB settlements won by TDU during that period, but there were many other victories in which members who had been fired were returned to work, those who had been disciplined had their records cleared, and members' rights to distribute literature and use bulletin boards were successfully defended.

Notes

1. 'Why They Fear the Truth', an editorial statement by the TDU Steering Committee, *Convoy*, no. 13.
2. Dennis King, *Lyndon LaRouche and the New American Fascism*, New York 1989, p. 346.
3. 'Fitz and Presser Find New Friends', *Convoy*, no. 20. The quote is from the June 1975 issue of *Steel Labor*.
4. King, *Lyndon LaRouche*, p. 336.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 339.

PART IV

THE TESTING OF TDU

Coordinating Committee, for recording secretary. An agreement was reached with Pete Karagozian of the Concerned Teamsters reform group not to slate two reformers for the same post so as to avoid dividing the reform vote (which had happened in 1977). In addition to running its own candidates, TDU supported Karagozian for president.

When the ballots were counted at the end of May, reformer Pete Karagozian had won the presidency with 3,705 votes to Bob Lins's 3,311; three other members of Karagozian's slate were elected as well, giving him a majority of the executive board and effective control of the local.¹ The TDU candidates lost, receiving approximately 2,800 votes or 44 percent of the total.

Nevertheless, TDU felt the results of the Local 299 election were a rank and file victory, because Karagozian, while not a TDU member, was a reformer and a militant. 'Defeating the International's chosen candidates in Fitzsimmons' home Local is a tremendous victory for the rank and file everywhere', said Pete Camarata, 'especially when you consider that the huge layoffs in all jurisdictions (over 50% in carhaul) made our job much tougher. ... We feel Pete Karagozian's election to President is a big step forward for the Local and we have no wish to challenge the outcome. Now TDU, all Local 299 members, and our new officers face the exciting challenge of making this a strong, democratic Local - one that represents the members and uses the power of the rank and file instead of fearing it.'²

There was a very similar situation at the end of 1981 in Cleveland Local 407, whose president, Jim Kinney, was strongly supported by then International Vice-President Jackie Presser. Kinney and his supporters on the executive board were opposed by two reform groups. One reform slate was led by Sam Theodus. There had been a Cleveland TDU chapter for many years, which published a local TDU newspaper called *Speak Out*. The Cleveland TDU chapter slated Mike Friedman its candidate for secretary-treasurer and Gary Lazarowski and Dave Anderson as candidates for trustees. In the end Theodus won the election while Friedman got 1,542 votes or 43 percent of the total. The elections in Detroit and Cleveland showed that even though TDU still could not win many elections in the big city freight locals, it could change the politics in the local union enough so that other reformers could be elected. Both Karagozian and Theodus were far more democratic and militant than the officials they replaced, and thus represented a real advance for the reform movement.

The other big election challenge during this period was in construction Local 213 in British Columbia and the Yukon Territory. Jack Vlahovic had been elected secretary-treasurer of that local in 1977, but he had been removed from office by union officials loyal to Canadian Conference Director Edward Lawson; John Donaldson had been appointed secretary-treasurer in his place. In the 1981 election Vlahovic led a full seven-person TDU Action

Reform Slate challenging Donaldson for leadership of the local. Unfortunately, there was also a third slate called the Unity Slate, headed by Bill Lewis; it appealed to both Donaldson and Vlahovic supporters and split the reform vote. Donaldson won the election with 1,741 votes, while Vlahovic got 1,464 and Lewis received 1,076. The Local 213 election results were a great disappointment, but TDU remained an important force in the local.

In another important race, TDU leader Bob Janadia, at the head of the Rank and File Slate, ran against incumbent local union President and International Vice-President Bobby Holmes, Sr. and his executive board in Detroit Local 337. There were no other slates on the ballot, and it seemed as if TDU had an excellent chance to beat one of the top leaders of the International in a head-to-head contest. But Holmes, seeing the seriousness of the challenge, used every dirty trick in the book to beat the reformers. First, Holmes hired a former associate of neo-Nazi Lyndon LaRouche, a man named Richard Leebove, as a 'communications' aide to organize a vicious red-baiting campaign against TDU, while at the same time spending thousands upon thousands of dollars on his own publicity.³ On election day uninformed voters or Holmes loyalists were bussed to the polling places and given free food and alcohol, while BLAST goon squads intimidated and harassed oppositionists. In addition, TDU believed there may have been irregularities in the balloting and vote counting itself.

Despite all these shenanigans Holmes defeated Janadia only narrowly, winning with just 51 percent of the vote. And Holmes still suffered a blow to his power and his pride when TDU member Jerry Bliss won 53 percent of the vote, defeating Holmes's son, Bobby, Jr., for secretary-treasurer. The election of Jerry Bliss to the executive board of Local 337 was another milestone in the growth of TDU, as it put a TDU member on the board of one of the union's most powerful locals. Shortly after Bliss's victory in Local 337, Doug Allan was elected a trustee of another important local, Local 208 in Los Angeles.

In a few areas TDU succeeded in electing the top officer and a majority of the local's executive board. For example, in December 1979 a full seven-person slate won election in Spokane Local 690; it was led by Rocky Lattanzio, a long-time reformer who had joined TDU soon after it was founded. The TDU chapter founded in 1977 was elected in 1979, and with virtually the entire chapter holding union office the TDU group disappeared. Once in office, however, and with no chapter to support them, differences developed among the reformers. Bob Wahl, who had been a member of Lattanzio's slate, opposed Lattanzio in the 1982 election, and Lattanzio was defeated. That unfortunate defeat showed how important it was to have a strong TDU chapter - as important as winning union office itself.

Only very rarely did a TDU member elected to union office turn against TDU. Such was the case with Brendan Kaiser, a carhauler for JATCO and