

Does Sean O'Brien Support Transphobia?

August 2, 2024



When International Brotherhood of Teamsters President Sean O'Brien announced he was going to speak at the Republican National Convention I was more ambivalent than many of those on the Left. Yes, Trump is abominable but the labor leaders speaking out for the Democrats are tying themselves to accessories to mass murder. They're not exactly bringing honor to the House of Labor either. Presumably some of the 186,000+ dead in Gaza were union members. So it goes, "solidarity forever" again becomes "solidarity sometimes."

What really irked me about O'Brien was his promotion on X (formerly Twitter) of a racist, transphobic article by Missouri Senator Josh Hawley that appeared in *Compact*. Hawley's article, "The Promise of Pro-Worker Conservatism," ran in an outlet whose senior editor recently had to resign due to her promotion of *Mein Kampf* and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. The Senator assailed corporate America for "using the profits to push diversity, equity, and inclusion and the religion of the trans flag." O'Brien's twitter post read "@JoshHawley is 100% on point," signifying complete and total agreement.

I am still a union member, but no longer a Teamster. When I was though, a part of Teamsters history that made me proud was the role of the union in fighting for LGBTQ+ rights. Yes, the same union of mafia domination and sweetheart contracts had a more honorable side to its history as well. In brief, when beer truck drivers in San Francisco were on strike they looked out to the community for support. The Teamsters approached well known gay activist Harvey Milk to enlist gay people to boycott the beer companies that wouldn't sign a union contract. Milk agreed with the promise from the union to "bring gays into the Teamsters union." When Coors busted its brewers union, future Pride at Work founder Howard Wallace helped get Coors out of San Francisco's gay bars in a boycott that was extended to 13 other states. In 1978, the homophobic Briggs Initiative was on the ballot in California. This proposal would have banned gays, lesbians, or anyone who spoke out for gay rights from teaching in California. Fortunately, the Briggs Initiative was defeated through the mobilization of the queer community with help from organized labor, including the Teamsters.

Of course that happy ending neglects the whole story. The Teamsters endorsed the homophobic

Ronald Reagan in both 1980 and 1984. Due to his closeness with the religious right, Reagan didn't use the word "AIDS" publicly until 1985 and he didn't give an address on it until 1987. In 1986 he did roar with laughter, though, at this knee slapper told by Bob Hope: "I just heard that the Statue of Liberty has AIDS but she doesn't know if she got it from the mouth of the Hudson or the Staten Island Fairy." In a conversation with biographer Edmund Morris, Reagan speculated that "maybe the Lord brought down this plague" since "illicit sex is against the Ten Commandments." By the end of Reagan's regime more than 70,000 Americans were dead of AIDS. Reagan's "Morning in America" was a terrifying midnight for the queer community.

The most mobbed up, crooked elements of the Teamsters also worked with political cultist Lyndon LaRouche to smear and attack the Teamsters reform movement. LaRouche later campaigned for two ballot issues in California that would have mandated quarantines for anyone with HIV or AIDS, with the explicit goal of getting them "out of our schools, out of commercial food establishments..." The LaRouche movement used specious arguments that AIDS could be transferred by casual contact and mosquito bites, all in an ultimately failed bid to incite panic. In 2000, the Teamsters flirted with endorsing Reagan Administration Communications Director and anti-free trade crusader Pat Buchanan for President, before ultimately settling on Al Gore. Buchanan stated in an NPR interview "I oppose the gay rights agenda in its entirety." In a 1983 column, he wrote gay people with AIDS "have declared war on nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution."

I would have thought those bad old days were behind us. Today, there is a Teamsters LGBTQ+ caucus and Teamsters in San Francisco celebrate the Coors boycott and the solidarity it built. In 2020 the Teamsters hailed a Supreme Court decision ruling that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act protected people who were discriminated against because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Then-president Hoffa, himself no reformer, said "No one should face discrimination for their sexual orientation, identity or for any other reason." Contrast this with the bigotry O'Brien says he supports "100%."



O'Brien Apology Letter

O'Brien did send an apology letter to Chris Fuentes of the Teamsters LGBTQ+ caucus. Parts of this apology are so circuitous they look like a lawyer or PR flack wrote them. O'Brien says he "in no way intended to support negative criticism of social issues" and that he apologized for "having caused consternation and confusion among members of the LGBTQ+ caucus." He reassures Fuentes that he

will “keep advocating for our LGBTQ+ members as I have from day one.” How O’Brien plans to do this while lauding such anti-queer politicians as Hawley and J.D. Vance (O’Brien said Vance has “been right there on all our issues,” despite his zero percent rating from the AFL-CIO) is unaddressed.

Much of the “left” media reaction to O’Brien’s promotion of anti-trans bigotry has been farcical. Even as a Teamsters communications staffer put out a swiftly deleted social media statement stating “Unions gain nothing from endorsing the racist, misogynistic, and anti-trans politics of the far right,” few have been willing to face the issue. At *Jacobin*, Teamster official Dustin Guastella didn’t see fit to bring it up. At *Labor Notes*, Teamsters for a Democratic Union steering committee member Dan Campbell mentions the “MAGA movement’s” attacks on trans people, but doesn’t acknowledge Sean O’Brien’s amplifying of same. At least Alexandra Bradbury, also at *Labor Notes*, called out that “divisive nonsense.”

In 2021, as a Teamster and TDU member, I campaigned for O’Brien. While handing out literature at one morning shift, I struck up a conversation with a gay man who was concerned that the shop steward was always wearing pro-Trump paraphernalia. He didn’t feel like the steward could represent him fairly, given the homophobia of the Republican Party. I agreed the union needed a new course and handed him some literature. Now I feel like I sold him a bill of goods.