

# O'Brien, the Teamsters, TDU, and the Labor Left: A Controversy

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An important discussion is taking place among Teamster activists and others in the labor movement and on the left about the leadership of Sean O'Brien, president of the Teamsters union. It is also a conversation about the role being played by Teamsters for a Democratic Union, for decades the voice of reform in the union. The debate involves rank-and-filers who have for years been involved in the union, labor intellectuals long associated with building a more democratic and militant labor movement, and socialist activists in the union and the reform movement.

The questions are: Is O'Brien a genuine reformer? Is TDU playing the critical role it might play in orienting activists in the reform movement? Are DSA and other leftists in the union contributing to building an independent rank-and-file movement?

Unfortunately, O'Brien is attempting to suppress this debate, while TDU prefers to ignore or to exclude it. The discussion, dispersed among various websites and social circles, is an important one and deserves a venue.

## Teamster Dissidents

The debate about O'Brien and TDU could be ignored until three long-time Teamster activists—Tom Leedham, Tim Sylvester, and Bill Zimmerman—published a stinging critique of both O'Brien and TDU in *Counterpunch* on February 22, 2024. The three have a total of about 120 years of involvement in the union and decades working for union reform. Tom Leedham has been a Teamster since 1977 and

has served at every level of Teamster leadership. He was TDU's candidate for Teamster President opposing James Hoffa, Jr. in three elections in 1998, 2001 and 2006. Tim Sylvester is a 42-year member of Teamster Local 804 where he was a shop steward, organizer, convention delegate and two term President. He was a candidate for General Secretary Treasurer in 2016. Bill Zimmerman is a 36-year retired Teamster who is still active. He served as a union Steward, Vice President, and President of Teamsters Local 206.

The three veteran Teamsters created a website called [teamsterlink.org](http://teamsterlink.org) where union members could post information, offer opinions, and discuss their union. Teamster link also engaged in investigative journalism, revealing the Teamsters \$45,000 contribution to the Republican National Committee and the O'Brien administration's firing by e-mail of dozens of the union's staff members, "without warning, severance, or health care."

Faced with a democratic forum where the members could carry on discussions of their union, Teamster President O'Brien hired the Nixon Peabody law firm to shut it down. The three veterans describe the firm and its case:

Nixon Peabody is a law firm that brags about their ability to bust-unions. They have impressive clients, including Donald J Trump, a list of union hating corporations, anti-union politicians and Sean O'Brien and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Nixon Peabody on behalf of the IBT is claiming ownership of the word Teamster and virtually any extension of that word.

Then, Tom Leedham explained in a phone interview, the Teamsters

...sent demands to both Apple and Google that they disable the teamsterlink apps that allow members to communicate on the forum. As we've maintained from the beginning, if the Teamster leadership is willing to waste dues money in this attack on free speech we cannot match their vast resources, but we will not go away. We will modify the site, create a new URL and continue to publish the truth about our union.

## **The Role of TDU**

In their article, Leedham, Sylvester, and Zimmerman also criticize TDU, writing that, "Teamsters for a Democratic Union, once considered the watchdog is now the propaganda wing of the O'Brien IBT." TDU has over the last two years become a virtually uncritical supporter and promoter of O'Brien.

As Joe Allen, a former Teamster, journalist, and union historian, reports in an article on *Medium*, a young, leftist Teamster and TDU activist with another website called Teamster Mobilize, was excluded from the TDU Convention because of her critical opinions. Allen writes:

The TDU convention was by-and-large a pretty ho-hum affair, except for the efforts of Teamsters Mobilize (TM), a small network of activists, to discuss several important issues, including a resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. For their worthwhile efforts, one member of TM was banned from the convention, while others were told they couldn't hand out any of their literature. You can watch an extensive interview with TM members about their convention experience [here](#).

For many years, the TDU staff led by Ken Paff, now formally retired but still playing an active role, and David Levin, have heavily policed attendance at the convention and stifled any critical debate and discussion. This year, Levin banned Chantelle (also known as Audrey in her articles), a UPS part-timer, from the convention even after she registered, because she wrote a criticism of TDU in *Cosmonaut*. No criticism of TDU is allowed to be debated at the convention, and great efforts were and are made behind the scenes to ensure that only positive stories of TDU are published in the media.

## **Left Intellectuals**

Long-time left intellectuals such as Kim Moody and Sam Gindin, both associated with the fight for reform in the labor movement, have also criticized O'Brien. Moody, a former editor and director of *Labor Notes*, the labor newspaper and education center, wrote a piece titled, "Why the Rush to Settle?," an article critical of O'Brien's handling of the UPS contract. Moody wrote in the September-October issue of *Against the Current*, beginning rather sarcastically,

Three hundred and forty thousand Teamsters at UPS will not join the "hot summer's" rising tide of strikes. Despite militant rhetoric from the leaders and the most massive rank-and-file strike preparations ever, the strike at logistics giant UPS that would undo the James Hoffa legacy of surrender to UPS, sound a Joshua-level blast that would bring down the walls of Amazon to unionization, and set new standards for the entire labor movement, was cancelled without further notice.

Moody conceded that O'Brien had negotiated a contract superior to those handled by James Hoffa, Jr., but notes that:

The promised "end of part-time poverty" was not achieved for all, and while two-tier pay for drivers were eliminated, the hourly gap between part-timers and full-time workers was not closed, and a two-tier setup was created for part-timers.

Under the new contract and on into the future there will be more part-timers and they will be earning less.

Moody asks,

So why did the Teamster leadership, after all the tough talk and genuine mass preparation, cancel a strike that could have prevented a two-tier system that will undermine average wages and worker solidarity in this contract and beyond?

He suggests that President Joe Biden intervened to pressure the Teamsters in order to prevent what would have been a very disruptive national strike. Perhaps, but if so, he found a compliant partner in O'Brien, who in any case seemed to prefer to avoid a strike. And O'Brien found a willing ally in TDU, as Moody writes, "since TDU did not explicitly call for a 'yes' or 'no' vote, but stated that the new agreement is 'a contract win we can be proud of.' "

Sam Gindin, the Canadian labor activist, in his article "Missed Opportunity? A Closer Look at the Teamster-UPS Agreement" suggests, just as Moody did, that the contract appeared at first blush to

be a victory:

Measured in conventional union terms, the Teamsters-UPS contract seems a clear Teamster victory. Backed by the threat to strike, the union pretty much achieved the goals it set out at the start of bargaining: no new concessions, some limits on overtime work, throwing out a two-tier structure accepted in the last agreement, and impressive wage increases of \$7.50 an hour over five years across the board, with \$2.75 of that coming in the first year.

But Gindin too believes that the contract failed to protect all of the members from exploitative two-tier and part-time arrangements. And he suggests that TDU subordinated itself to O'Brien in exchange for influence:

The problem was not TDU supporting O'Brien over the Hoffa-chosen candidate, especially since the group could not win on its own and running would split the progressive vote. Rather, the issue was that TDU gave up most of its independence in exchange for an influential role in the contract campaign. It was integrated into the O'Brien camp and - despite some independent organizing early in the campaign - became loyal in carrying out the limited bargaining program.

Gindin suggests that O'Brien's failure to lead the union out on strike and the contract's weaknesses in representing part-time and two-tier workers will weaken its attempt to organize Amazon and other logistics companies, since the Teamsters union showed neither the strength nor the solidarity that it might have.

The Democratic Socialists of America, which has adopted a "rank-and-file strategy" in the union movements (a term originally coined and popularized on the left by Kim Moody), worked closely with TDU around the O'Brien election and the UPS contract. Less experienced DSA members following the guidance of TDU also accommodated to O'Brien. At an exciting DSA "strike ready" event in Chicago, one of the speakers told the gathering of young activists, "because of the tireless efforts of union reform movements like TDU, for the first time in twenty-five years the rank and file is in power inside the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. And because of this our leadership says if we don't have a contract by August 1, we are walking." That is, DSA's young activists, anxious to get involved in the UPS strike, believed that TDU had influence and that working with TDU, DSA could too. That is, O'Brien absorbed TDU and TDU absorbed the DSA Teamster group. DSA therefore became incapable of developing an independent and critical attitude toward O'Brien and the Teamster leadership.

### **Time for Change in the Teamsters and TDU**

The U.S. labor movement is changing. Leaders like Shawn Fain, president of the United Auto Workers and Fran Drescher, president of the SA-AFTRA, the actors union, not only led their unions out on strike but did so talking about the need for a class struggle against the corporations and billionaire class. Unions are now also willing to take up controversial political positions in support of the exploited and oppressed, such as the dozen or so national unions that support a ceasefire in the Israeli war on Palestine.

We have a new progressive labor movement and unfortunately the Teamsters is not part of it. Sean O'Brien went to Mar-a-Lago to meet with Donald Trump, now the leader of the white Christian

nationalist Republican party who spews hatred for immigrants. Then O'Brien invited him to Teamster headquarters to meet with the General Executive Board. A member of the board, John Palmer, in a powerful letter to O'Brien that he read aloud on YouTube, announced that he refused to attend a meeting with him, calling Trump "a known union buster, scab, and insurrectionist." Many Teamsters recognize their union is on the wrong track.

Rank-and-file Teamsters will have to organize to change the Teamsters. TDU could help, but it would have give up its subordination to O'Brien.