Teamsters for a Democratic Union?

written by Andrew Sernatinger | August 11, 2026

In 1982, socialist activist and academic Sam Friedman published *Teamster Rank and File: Power, Bureaucracy, and Rebellion at Work* (TRAF) about the arc of a rebellious Local Union in California over roughly twenty-five years. *TRAF* recounts the struggle within Local 208 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), beginning with a movement of rank-and-file truck drivers at one "barn" (Teamster lingo for "shop" or "bargaining unit") in Los Angeles in the 1950s, through their rise to leadership within the Local; the complex interplay of class struggle, Teamster politics, and changes in the trucking industry; and a trusteeship of the union following the 1970 wildcat strike.

The book itself has a story that's worth paying attention to. In the mid-1970s, Sam Friedman, an academic researcher and then-partisan of the International Socialists, approached Local 208 with a proposal to study the union and draw out its lessons for rank-and-file workers more broadly. Local 208's leadership and general membership agreed, allowing Friedman access to officers and the rank and file alike. Friedman attended executive board and general membership meetings, shadowed business agents (BAs) on their daily business, sat in on Stewards' Councils, interviewed members of Local 208 as well as management at the shops the union represented, attended grievance panels and arbitrations, and was granted access to the union's files for archival research. All of this gave Friedman a highly unusual access to the extraordinary Local Union; the interviews with workers and participants in the events interspersed in the book give it a feel of a story lived rather than an abstracted study.

However, the publication of *TRAF* in 1982 coincided with the end of the organized trucking industry as it had existed for nearly fifty years. Whereas half a million workers, and thousands of companies, had been covered by the Teamster Master Freight Agreement (MFA) at its height, the MFA has been reduced to an agreement that essentially covers only one company, ABF, and perhaps 10,000 workers. The world that is described in *TRAF* is gone—in its place is a nonunion freight industry that hardly resembles what once was.

For the history of the book, the immediate appeal of *TRAF* was limited on its release. Friedman notes, in his introduction to the second edition, that when Columbia University Press first published the book, it was scheduled to be an expensive hardcover-only printing aimed at academics. Friedman convinced the publisher to print a run of 500 paperback copies, which he personally paid for and distributed to contacts at no cost. Additionally, the book did not receive a warm welcome from Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), as *TRAF*'s conclusion (correctly) anticipated that TDU would likely steer away from shop-floor activism and toward elections within the IBT as its central strategy.

Forty years later, anyone looking for a copy of the book will find only a limited number of secondhand hardbacks, if they can get the book at all. But interest in the Teamsters resurfaced in 2021 with the election of Sean O'Brien as general president of the International Union and talk of a strike at UPS. This recent history is beyond the scope of this review, but the competing perspectives on this O'Brien Teamster period have renewed interest in earlier periods of Teamster history for a new generation of labor activists and young leftists. The second edition of *TRAF* recovers what feels like valuable lost history, telling the story of a time that, in some ways, is so unlike our own, but also strikingly familiar—Teamster militants will find that the description of the union and how it works is nearly unchanged half a century after the events described in the book.

Local 208

At the time the book was written, Los Angeles Teamsters Local 208 was a union of "over 5000 members at more than 200 workplaces, primarily trucking companies" (56). *TRAF* covers the thirty-year arc of the rank and file in Local 208 as they attempted to create a militant, democratic Local Union, a drive that largely succeeded.

The story begins in the late 1940s, when the IBT installed John Filipoff as the secretary-treasurer (typically, the principal officer in a Teamsters Local Union). Under Filipoff, Local 208 operated as one might imagine a stereotypical Teamsters Union would work: the officials failed or refused to do the basic work of representing workers in their disputes with management. Worker Mauricio Terrazas is quoted as saying, "There was no democracy at all. They ruled it from the top. One guy I worked with was paid $10 each meeting to work over anyone who raised stuff from the floor." As a result, drivers "were harassed, overworked, cheated out of benefits and protections contractually due them, and fired arbitrarily" (75).

In the mid-1950s a driver at Pacific Motor Transport (PMT) was fired after calling in sick. BAs at Local 208 ignored the members' pleas to reinstate their coworker. Frustrated, the driver-members barred entry to the workplace until the issue was resolved. As a result Local 208 BAs immediately arrived and secured a job for the fired worker.

John T. Williams, a black truck driver and soon-to-be key figure in the struggle within the Local, was similarly fired over an accident in the terminal. "The Local did not try to defend him or even to get him his pay for that last night; it just told him to work out of the hiring hall." Williams, who was driving freight while going through law school, added his intellectual heft to the effort.

The crises around basic defense of a worker catalyzed the struggle for democracy in Local 208. Years of frustration with the company and with the union spurred rank-and-file drivers to take on the deficiencies of the Local through a combination of efforts to democratize the Local Union and use direct action to confront their employers.

In the 1950s, Local 208 had no shop stewards—union business was conducted by BAs or not at all. Members requested stewards from the Local but the BAs rebuffed them. So the drivers at PMT selected their own stewards and forced the company to deal with them or risk workers disrupting the operation. PMT gave in, and shortly after Local 208 conceded and recognized stewards as part of the union's representation system.

TRAF details further efforts to build a formal Stewards' Council, to institute elections for BAs (rather than having them appointed), to secure rank-and-file control of contract negotiations for control of the Local Union itself, and the aborted desires to spread their model to other Teamster locals. The story winds through decisions made by factions within the ranks of 208, the maneuvering of the Teamster Joint Councils against Teamster president Jimmy Hoffa at the national IBT bureaucracy,

and the various trusteeships imposed on the Local to wrest control away from the ranks.

“Drivers and Driving” (chapter 3) is a crucial chapter for understanding the objective factors that made the rank-and-file movement possible. This is one of the shining moments of *TRAF*. Friedman explains concretely how the industry structured driving in a way that facilitated drivers from different barns and terminals regularly interacting with one another during the workday, which was the precondition of any organized movement. But more than that, truck driving allowed for *unsupervised* socializing between members of Local 208, free from the employers and the union officials.

In the 1950s, the kind of surveillance that has become part and parcel of working life was simply not a factor. Further, because the few BAs in Local 208 were spread across 200 barns, members rarely encountered BAs. The absence of serious intervention created an environment in which workers were freer to discuss, build trust, strategize, and execute their plans. This happened out of the union’s hiring hall for drivers laid off from regular employment, in parking lots where members set up recreational spaces in tents or out of cars, and in cafes that drivers frequented between deliveries.

Though the drivers were impelled by the failure of the union to respond to their real workplace grievances, it’s important to pay attention to the balance of power in the freight industry over the period discussed in the book. When the freight industry was organized in the 1930s, it was made up of thousands of small employers in regional economies. “In 1951, there were 47,435 trucking companies in the United States. Only 34 of these had 500 or more employees” (121). The Teamsters Union was effectively larger and more organized than any of these companies, and it was possible for an organized rank and file to catch the employers unprepared and to win real and immediate victories, which galvanized their movement. Already by the 1960s, the industry had begun to consolidate into fewer, larger firms, with a professional layer of labor relations specialists who were ready to rebuff the union. Local 208 stood on this shifting terrain; as the movement formed, they had greater potential power. Paradoxically, as the drivers’ rank and file organization developed, the opportunities to exert their growing power shrank as the industry changed around them.

This brings us to the issue of contingency. In many ways, what makes *TRAF* such an engrossing read is that it is a story of things that probably should not have happened. The regular mechanisms of the union bureaucracy failed such that a rank-and-file movement was able to form. The mature movement was able to win power over the Local but it then faced the combined forces of the employers and the IBT. The story gives us a rare look into the problems a rank-and-file movement in power might face, where we are more familiar with the early stages a movement-in-formation faces.

We can observe the contingent factors:

1. The Local Union fails to service the membership at the minimum level expected.

2. The workers are adequately organized to take the initiative for their mutual aid and defense.

3. If their efforts are successful, the rank and file seek to have their activity legitimized and incorporated into the Local Union.

4. The bureaucracy refuses, ignores, or rejects the workers’ endeavors.

5. The rank and file seek to change the Local, challenging the bureaucracy either directly (for office) or indirectly (over practices, policy, bylaws, etc.).

6. The bureaucracy either:

    - Seeks to incorporate the leaders of the movement into the bureaucracy;

    - Presents a unified front of its officials against the rank and file to smash it;

    - Splits, where a section of officials seek to advance their own ambitions in alliance with the rank-and-file; or,

    - Submits for a change of venue to another arena more favorable to them (i.e. the International Union or a court of law), often forcing a receivership, where the local union's autonomy is stripped and decisions are made by an appointed trustee.

The story of Local 208 is fascinating because the bureaucracy repeatedly had opportunities to reassert their control with decisions that would have appeased the ranks and not fundamentally upset the balance of power. If instead of rebuking the workers the bureaucracy had incorporated certain practices, one would expect that the opposition would have been contained. Instead, they repeatedly failed to act appropriately, and that failure creates the possibility (but not the inevitability) of a greater organized movement.

The IBT, too, could have acted to stifle the insurgent movement. However, faced with raids by the AFL-CIO, federal corruption charges, breakaway locals, and rank-and-file resistance, the IBT did not oppose changes in Local 208 that would normally be considered incompatible with its rule, i.e., elected BAs chosen directly by the rank and file. The conflict among IBT officials provided breathing room for the members in 208, though the IBT ultimately reasserted itself following the Teamster Wildcats in 1970.

To their credit, in the 1950s, Local 208 rank and filers did not believe that they were strong enough to directly contest for control of the Local. Instead they sought to build support in their shops and to advance their objectives through motions at membership meetings. This unintentionally helped the long-term prospects of the movement, because rank-and-file leaders were forced to develop independently and through direct shop-floor actions that built up an active layer of members to give substance to their democratic project. They just as easily could have won office prematurely and been disciplined into reproducing the business union practices they sought to overcome. Reading how this perfect storm brewed is a gift to anyone on the labor left.

TDU: 1982 and 2026

TRAF (in)famously warned, as early as 1982, that Teamsters for a Democratic Union was not immune to the conservatizing pressures to bureaucratize.

> The direct bureaucratization of TDU seems unlikely. That would involve the development of a central staff in TDU that could exert its power over the membership and that could erode the rank-and-file democracy that characterizes the organization.… Bureaucratization of TDU is more likely to occur…[as] an institutionalized union opposition, creating a *de facto* two-party

> system within the IBT.… The growth of electoralism in TDU and the associated approach of looking toward lower-level union officers to carry out the battle in place of the active struggle of the rank-and-file, might well lead to this.… If Local officials get elected by TDU, and stay in the organization, they will become an influential leadership grouping within TDU. They will, however, be subject to all the conservatizing forces discussed.… One can readily imagine the development of a bureaucratic cadre in the TDU national office around staff members who become experts at running elections. (217)

This is precisely what happened—even the "unlikely" parts. TDU formally became a nonprofit, which has been run for over fifty years by Ken Paff, Peter Landon, and David Levine from offices first in Detroit and then New York. TDU is the "membership" wing of the organization, while the "Teamster Rank and File Education and Legal Defense Fund" (TRF) is a 501(c)3 that takes money from anyone who cares to donate. In the 1980s, TRF appealed to the federal government to have its list of contributors exempt from public reporting requirements. They were successful, and to this day the names of contributors are kept secret.

The membership structure of TDU has been effectively killed: there are no longer TDU branches where activists meet to formulate plans. "Democracy" is limited to the annual TDU "Convention" where a slate of candidates for the "International Executive Board" (who have been picked in advance) are approved by the "members"—membership, too, has come to mean anyone who pays their annual $50 fee to TDU. The International Executive Board has been made up primarily of Local officers or IBT staff, many of whom have won their positions with TDU's support. How this developed in the years since the events in *TRAF* is beyond the scope of this review, but Friedman was attentive to these possibilities even before the Ron Carey administration (1991–97).

We can touch only briefly on TDU's alliance with Sean O'Brien, general president of the IBT, and on what this alliance represents. O'Brien embarked on a great marketing campaign for a 2022 strike at UPS that never materialized. Part-time UPS Teamsters organized a "Vote No" campaign, akin to TDU's campaign in 2016, in which the new agreement failed to raise the wages of part-timers or to seriously address the conditions inside UPS sort-and-pick facilities. TDU sided with O'Brien and opposed the "Vote No" campaign. TDU likewise sided with O'Brien when he sued Teamsterlink.org, a rank-and-file website, for using the IBT logo, as TDU has done for decades. And they have worked— through editorials and election protests—to defeat the FEARLESS slate of members who were running for the top union office. The result is that for the first time in nearly forty years, there will be no election for top officers in the IBT.

The real weakness of this new edition is Friedman's commentary from the present in 2026 is its failure to analyze the current role of TDU. In the new Introduction to the second edition of *TRAF*, he gives the first, last, and only word on TDU and the Teamsters to Ken Paff. He does not engage even one other Teamster regarding TDU or O'Brien; not Tim Sylvester, Tom Leedham, or Bill Zimmerman, longtime stalwarts of TDU who were cast out when they voiced their consciences about the disaster of the O'Brien alliance; not Dan La Botz or Mel Packer, or any of the older International Socialists (IS) cadres who founded TDU and are still alive today; not Richard Hooker Jr. or John Palmer who were leading the FEARLESS slate; not Joe Allen who has written extensively on the Teamsters; and certainly not any younger activists who may be attracted to Teamsters Mobilize, like Jess Leigh, who was barred from attending TDU's convention in 2025.

Instead, Friedman ultimately characterizes TDU as a longtime success. He leans on nostalgia for the IS as he dismisses the many controversies as merely unfortunate. It feels an alien imposition onto a book that is otherwise grounded in the activity of those it seeks to study. Similar to Pete Camarata and Doug Allen's foreword in 1982, I welcome this book—and suggest skipping the introduction (at least until the end).

See Samuel R. Friedman's response to this review at New Politics online.