TDU at Fifty: From Rank-and-File Rebels to Defenders of the Establishment

written by Dan La Botz | November 7, 2025

Teamsters for a Democratic Union, which will be celebrating the group's fiftieth anniversary at its convention being held in Chicago this November 7 to 9, has for decades been known as the voice of reform in the Teamsters Union. But this year there will be those inside and outside the convention hall challenging TDU's direction and arguing that it has abandoned its ideal. At the center of the controversy is TDU's support for Teamster president Sean O'Brien who is allied with President Donald Trump.

Some Teamsters no longer see TDU as fighting for reform but rather as part of the establishment. They are appalled that O'Brien has aligned with President Donald Trump who has fired hundreds of thousands of federal workers, torn up their contracts, and effectively destroyed their unions, while at the same time he has reversed decades of Black workers' achievements, and attacked immigrants. TDU's alliance with O'Brien and thus with Trump has tarnished its reputation as a movement for union reform and social justice, while isolating the Teamsters from the majority of the labor movement.

For a number of TDU members and other Teamsters, TDU's alliance with O'Brien and his support for Trump have become the central issue. Leonard Stoehr, a longtime Teamster now living in the Atlanta area, is an over-the-road driver for ABF company. Stoehr says, "I think a plurality of Teamsters voted for Trump, but without full information. They thought he was going to have a laser-like focus on the economy to help working people, but, once he took office, he went right back to representing the oligarchy, which is where he comes from. We will absolutely raise the Trump issue at the TDU convention, because support for Trump is a death-wish for organized labor."

Dave Robbins, now retired, was a Teamster for fifty years and served as a steward or local officer in several local unions; he first joined TDU in 1977. He spent his life fighting for the union's members. He will be going to the TDU convention with his wife Sol Rodriguez, also a TDU member. Dave doesn't mince words. "Sean O'Brien is a terrible general president for so many reasons, but primarily for remaining silent about Trump's racism, anti-immigrant attitudes. He's a traitor, a class-traitor, and he should not be endorsed by TDU. Sean O'Brien is a pro-fascist, Trump-supporter."

David Levin, TDU's national organizer, the top staff person, disagrees. As he wrote to me, "Endorsing Sean O'Brien and the Teamsters United Slate does not mean endorsing Donald Trump or attacks on workers. TDU has been, and will continue to be vocal in our opposition to attacks on the

working class, including OSHA, the NLRB, immigrant workers, and union-busting of federal worker unions." He argues that since O'Brien real gains have been made. "Under new leadership, the IBT is standing up to employers and mobilizing members."

Or as Peter Landon, a longtime TDU activist and former TDU staff person puts it, "I don't support O'Brien. I do recognize the opportunities he has created for the membership to play far more of a role in the union."

Some in TDU appear to have bought the argument that though Trump is an authoritarian, a union-buster, a racist and a sexist, who dispatches ICE, the National Guard, and active-duty troops to our cities, nevertheless they will continue to back O'Brien as long as it gives TDU more latitude for organizing in the Teamsters. This is the devil's bargain that TDU has made. They are willing to endorse O'Brien, accepting his alliance with Trump as long as he tolerates the TDU's organizing in and through the union.

At this convention, TDU will be holding a vote on whether or not to endorse O'Brien for union president for five more years. If TDU does endorse him, it will renew the devil's bargain in both senses of that phrase, making a morally compromised decision that accepts a short-term gain for a larger, long-term loss. Such an endorsement would be made with eyes wide open and the knowledge that Sean O'Brien is comfortable with the Teamsters carrying the mantle of MAGA's favorite union.

TDU in its Heyday

Teamsters for a Democratic Union began fifty years ago as a small group of rank-and-file activists committed to union democracy and militancy. I was one of them. After its founding, TDU opened a national office and hired a small staff paid modest wages made possible by the members' dues and by grants from progressive foundations. (Today according to public documents TDU has revenues of over $300,000 and its educational and legal arm, Teamster Rank And File Education And Legal Defense Foundation raised $1.43 million in 2023. These are modest amounts compared to the Teamsters union's treasury and to the wealthy corporations against which TDU for years fought for the members rights.)

TDU fought for things like elected rather than appointed union stewards and ran reformers for local

union office as well as for top offices of the international union. When the U.S. Justice Department brought a RICO suit against the union and threatened to take it over, TDU argued that instead, as the feds removed the mafia. it should allow the membership to have free elections with the right to vote on the union's top officers. The Justice Department and the courts agreed with TDU and rank-and-file Teamsters won a real victory for democracy.

For nearly all of its history, TDU was in the opposition and often persecuted by the Teamster leadership and company bosses. TDU members elected to the top offices of local unions found themselves blocked at every turn by the Teamsters' national leadership. Only for five years, during the presidency of Ron Carey, whom TDU had helped to elect, was TDU not only tolerated but accepted by the union leadership. Carey and TDU, while they did not always see eye-to-eye, collaborated on local elections and contracts. It was TDU's heyday. That was the TDU that I described in my book *Rank-and-File Rebellion: Teamsters for a Democratic Union* published back in 1990.

TDU Makes a Deal with the Devil

Under Jimmy Hoffa, Jr., who served as Teamster general president from 1998 to 2018, that is for twenty-five long years, TDU was a persecuted opposition. Veteran TDU leaders like Ken Paff, and his successor David Levin yearned to come in out of the cold, to be able once again to operate with the support of the union leadership as they had when Ron Carey was president. The 2022 Teamster presidential election provided that opportunity.

Sean O'Brien, the head of Boston Local 25, was running for President of the Teamsters Union and remaking himself as a Teamster reformer. The head of Boston Local 25, he had a reputation as a thug. For example, he intervened in 2013 in the local election in Teamster 251 in Rhode Island, threatening the TDU activists there who were running a slate against his preferred candidate. "They need to be punished," said O'Brien. The Teamsters Independent Review Board charged O'Brien and found him guilty of violating the Teamster Constitution and federal law when he threatened TDU members and he was suspended for two weeks.

Yet in 2022, in their campaign for the union's top offices, O'Brien and his running mate Fred Zuckerman, known as the OZ slate, put themselves forward as reformers. Seeing an opportunity, Paff and Levin, negotiated with O'Brien to form an alliance, and eventually won over the TDU leadership and the TDU convention. O'Brien, with TDU's support, won the election and became Teamster president.

The first item on O'Brien's agenda was the UPS contract set to expire in August of 2023. He gave the impression he was prepared to lead a national strike to win the union's demands. Back in 1997, President Ron Carey working with TDU had led UPS workers in a tremendous strike and won a real victory. The slogan for that strike had been "Part-Time America Won't Work," and the union forced the company to agree to create 10,000 new full-time jobs. It was one of the most important strikes by any union in that era and many Teamsters now wanted to repeat it. To prepare, TDU worked with O'Brien on planning the strategy and tactics needed to educate and organize the members.

But the strike never happened. O'Brien negotiated a contract with the company, which TDU proclaimed a historic victory, and there were some significant gains, but it was, in fact, weak in several areas. Most importantly it failed to end part-time status for workers who now made up 60% of the workforce. As Sam Gindin, former research director for the Canadian Auto Workers wrote, "The union made big gains — but in opting not to strike over demands beyond wages, the Teamsters may have passed up a transformative opportunity for the labor movement."

Having won the Teamster presidency and having settled the UPS contract in August 2023 without a strike, O'Brien went off to Mar-a-Lago to kiss Trump's ring, and then in July of 2024 O'Brien spoke at the Republican Party National Convention. While the Teamster leadership had declined to endorse either Kamala Harris or Donald Trump, O'Brien's speech was clearly a tacit endorsement of Donald Trump. To quell any doubts about where the union stood, the Teamsters made large financial contributions to Trump and other Republican candidates. So, TDU, now allied with O'Brien, has come full circle, from fighting the powers-that-be to joining them.

Teamster Reform in a New Era

The TDU convention this year will be different from others because there will be vocal opposition to the leadership both within and without the convention. In an attempt to diminish the opposition, TDU steering committee members and staff have called some dissident members and suggested, "Maybe it would be better if you don't come this year." Still there will be dissident members on the floor.

Some opposition will come from organized groups who oppose TDU's current course. One such activist group within the union is Teamsters Mobilize (TM).

One member of TM is Jennifer Hancock of Local 322 , a part-time UPS employee in the warehouse, a sorter at the Coach Road hub and package car center in Richmond. "I've been doing it for 34 years," she explains. "I'm also the political coordinator for Teamster local 322. We support candidates who support labor," and most of those she says are Democrats

A few years ago, Hancock got involved in a TDU discussion group among UPS part-timers, mostly young people, a group that subsequently evolved into Teamsters Mobilize. "The general word about part-timers is that we're lazy, we're stoned, etc. But a few years ago, a bunch of us on a TDU part-timer chat decided to put together a group hoping to influence the next contract. At that time, we were still trying to work with TDU, so we went to the TDU convention. We wanted a part-timer caucus. There were Black caucuses, Latino caucuses, and women's caucus. So why not a part-timer caucus? We finally got a watered-down resolution passed, but then it just disappeared. We're told we couldn't organize a caucus and would just have to rely on grievances. So, our hands were tied behind our backs."

Teamster Mobilize went from being a part-time employee caucus to a more general reform group within the union. Their website says, "Teamsters Mobilize is a grassroots organization of Teamster activists organizing to build up real worker power in our union against our employers and their cronies, to expose corrupt Teamsters leadership, and to build brick-by-brick a genuine fighting labor movement." A statement that sounds like TDU back in the 1970s and 80s when it was fighting Teamster presidents Frank Fitzsimmons, Roy Williams, and Jackie Presser.

This year it seems Hancock won't be going to the convention. "I'm still a member of TDU, but I'm not allowed to come to the convention." David Levine wrote her saying she couldn't attend because she and Teamsters Mobilize members intended to "crash' the convention. Levine wrote, "TDU is not going to allow non-registrants to crash our Convention or the Convention hotel and we are not going to allow TM to have a mixed group of registrants and crashers."

But Hancock doesn't believe that's the real reason she is being excluded. "I believe there is going to be a floor vote on Sean O'Brien and they know that we would be against that. So, they're putting their finger on the scale to get the result they want. I would not have voted for Sean O'Brien in any case. I don't support Sean O'Brien because he is not supporting labor. Everything Sean O'Brien has done has been about supporting Sean O'Brien. His support for the Trump administration is also a big

issue."

She gives the example of Donald Trump's firing of Gwynne A. Wilcox, removing her from the NLRB. When that happened, my principal officers and others went up to Washington, D.C. to protest—but the O'Brien and the International officers did nothing."

Overall, says Hancock, "I am very disappointed in TDU. When I first joined TDU, this was before Sean O'Brien's election, everyone told me what a great organization it was. We took TDU's word and campaigned for Sean O'Brien. Then TDU snuggled up to the O'Brien administration and now there's no light between them."

John Palmer of the Hooker Slate

John Palmer, hails from San Antonio, Texas a member of Local 657 was a freight driver for ABF for years but is now international vice-president-at-large, elected on the O'Brien-Zuckerman slate. "I was played," he says. I knew what O'Brien was, I had sat next to him for five years, but Fred Zuckerman convinced me that O'Brien had found religion and would be a reformer."

Palmer soon learned that was not so. "It started when I objected to the UPS contract. I was the only one on the executive board who raised an objection. And I did it in public. I went to the press about it." At a meeting to discuss the tentative contract, "I was attacked by all of the other executive board members. When they were done, I told them, 'I appreciate the dogpile. Now I'm going to put together a slate,' " meaning an opposition slate to run against them. And he did. Today Palmer is running on the Hooker Fearless Slate for the same position he now holds.

When O'Brien organized a meeting with presidential candidate Donald Trump, Palmer explained, "I refused to meet with Trump. I know who Trump is. I wouldn't sit in the same room with him for two reasons. First, he was a draft dodger. I'm a veteran and my dad and his brothers all served. Second, he's a scab."

Like some of the others with whom I talked, Palmer is also disappointed in TDU. "How can TDU be a democratic membership organization, when so many decisions are made by the national organizer," for 45 years Ken Paff and now David Levin.

Palmer says, "I won't be going to the TDU Convention, but I and many of our slate members will be at the hotel in Chicago. "I'm not coming to raise a ruckus. I'm 67 years old. I'm past that. But I'll be talking with the members."

Richard Hooker, Candidate for General President

Richard Hooker is the secretary-treasurer, the top officer of Philadelphia Teamster Local 623. Before becoming a full-time union officer, he was a UPS worker. "I've done every job you can think of at UPS." The son of a preacher, he began working at UPS while attending Drexel University, and is now married and the father of four children.

"I'm not going to the convention, but I will be in the same hotel, collecting signatures from those who are there. The signatures are to become an accredited slate, though if we have to, we could still get on the ballot at the convention. But the TDU convention is a good opportunity to listen to and to talk with our members."

While not a TDU member, Hooker says, he used to support TDU. But no more. "I'm shocked by TDU's support for O'Brien. Even though I never was a member I always respected their fight, their being there. From the very beginning I never supported Sean O'Brien because of his intimidation,

retribution, and retaliation. He has a history of doing that. He's also known for failing to win strong contracts. He has a history of concessions, 13 of the last 18 years we have had concessions and he has a lot to do with that."

Like others, Hooker criticizes O'Brien for "his fascination with Trump. He's decided to go along with Trump and everything that he's done. But not just Trump, also the ruling class, the employer class, the billionaire class, because that's who Trump represents. He doesn't represent the workers."

Hooker is also critical of O'Brien's actions within the Teamsters. "If you look at what O'Brien did when he first got elected. He eliminated a lot of people from the staff and 70 percent of them black and brown people." As a result, Hooker explains, "The union, that is the union's members, had to pay 2.9 million dollars as a result of a discrimination lawsuit. And then he fired three other officials for their support of the rival Steve Vairma slate. The union members had to pay 2 years back wages to each of those people. His policies don't work for the Teamsters or for the broader working class."

Hooker is disappointed with TDU today. "They have a go along to get along attitude. No matter what O'Brien does, they refuse to speak out against him. TDU was built to educate and empower and to call out wrong-doing." But today, he says, TDU doesn't speak out. "When you are silent, you have taken the side of the oppressor. That is what TDU has done because they refuse to speak out against the oppressor of the Teamsters. They have become what they fought against."

Sean O'Brien, candidate for reelection, will be speaking at the TDU Convention, though he is not a member, and Richard Hooker, also not a member, will not be given such an opportunity. Levin wrote to Hooker, "TDU is not going to spend the members' time or funds to host a campaign speech by you." While TDU certainly has a right to determine who speaks and its conventions, it seems a shame not to allow the two candidates for Teamster president—the only two so far—to debate or at least speak. What an educational opportunity for the members! But Levin, clearly committed to O'Brien, has no interest in helping his opposition.

What Next for TDU?

With its fifty-year history, its substantial and expanding foundation fundraising capacity, its permanent staff, the continuity of its leadership, and its conviction that it's the genuine voice of Teamster members, I think of TDU as something like a miniature version of the labor bureaucracy. Not financially privileged like most union officials, not corrupt like some officials have been, not tied to a political party, at least not until recently, but still a power center in the union which despite its theory and its genuine attempts to root itself among them remains separate from the union members.

Given all of this, TDU seems unlikely to change course, though there is the possibility that this convention could realign the organization, that it could return to its more militant roots. Denying O'Brien its endorsement would reestablish TDU as an independent organization speaking up for the Rank & File and holding leadership accountable, regardless of the risk. Not unlike the original founders of TDU some fifty years ago.