

Teamsters and Fascism, Then and Now

written by Hank Kennedy | September 25, 2024



The Teamsters Union has not officially endorsed any candidate, but Teamster President Sean O'Brien attended and spoke at the Republican Party Connection and praised Trump and other praised rightwing Republicans. Teamsters Joint Councils and Locals representing hundreds of thousands of workers voted to support Harris.

Until recently, "Christian Nationalist" was not a label U.S. politicians applied for themselves. Instead, it was a term applied derisively by opponents to those who wanted to tear down the wall of separation between church and state. There's good reason why politicians were not lining up to name themselves "Christian Nationalists." Christian Nationalism was a conscious attempt to wrap up fascism in the cross and the flag to make it more palatable to the American public. The first movement in this country to self-identify as such was led by Reverend Gerald L.K. Smith, an anti-Semite, a fascist sympathizer, and a segregationist. Smith's Christian Nationalist Crusade existed from the 40s until his death in 1976, all the while railing against Blacks, Jews, socialists, and unions.

Today, there are politicians on the right who *do* choose the label "Christian Nationalist." Among them are Missouri's Senator Josh Hawley and Ohio's Senator (and Donald Trump's pick for Vice President) J.D. Vance. Both of these politicians have the anti-labor record you would expect from people following in Smith's footsteps. Smith was paid off by auto tycoons like Henry Ford and Horace Dodge to rally workers against forming a union. Hawley has an 11% lifetime score from the AFL-CIO. Vance is stuck at rock bottom with 0%. The main labor legislation he has sponsored is Senator Marco Rubio's proposal to legalize pro-management company unions. Yet both of these politicians have been touted by Sean O'Brien, the president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, one of the largest unions in the country. O'Brien went so far as to say Vance "has been right there with us on all of our issues," despite the fact that the Senator voted against labor every time he was able to. This is a drastic change from how the Teamsters talked about far right politicians during the far right upsurge of the 1930s and 40s.

When the pro-fascist Silver Shirts, a group explicitly modeled on the Nazi brownshirts, threatened to

crush Teamsters 544 in the 1930s, there was no talk about how the fascists had been right there with them on all of their issues. Instead, the union organized a union defense guard, practiced drills, and successfully prevented the Silver Shirts from so much as holding a rally in Minneapolis, let alone smashing the union in a vigilante attack. Teamsters 544 had the benefit of being led by militant, revolutionary socialists like Farrell Dobbs who knew exactly what fascist victory would mean for the workers movement.

Even the international union, led by the conservative Democrat Dan Tobin, was aware of the dangers of fascism and educated their members as to that danger. One issue of the *International Teamster* recommended John Roy Carlson's book *Under Cover*, an expose of American fascists. The publication urged Teamsters: "If you want to see who is creeping up behind you with a knife, read *Under Cover*." In his book, Carlson details how Smith's Christian Nationalism was bankrolled by the super rich. One of Smith's lieutenants says "I seen plenty of money comin' in. I used to see checks for \$2000 and \$3000. Workers don't send them in. No sir, it was the manufacturers."

Another issue ran quotes of pro-fascist individuals and publications in the U.S. excerpted from Michael Sayers and Albert Kahn's *Sabotage! The Secret War Against America*. Those quoted included Gerald L.K. Smith, anti-labor "Radio Priest" Father Charles Coughlin, and Parker Sage, head of the pro-Nazi "workers" organization, the National Workers League. The League didn't do anything for workers. Its real purpose was to stir up racism and anti-Semitism in Detroit auto plants. All of these people were strongly opposed to any militant, independent labor unions. The labor organizations they wanted were modeled after those in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. They would be meek, compliant, and totally dominated by fascists and Nazis.

Finally, the Teamsters took pride in opposing Illinois Congressman Stephen A. Day in a piece entitled "Labor Fights Friends of Fascism" by Lester Hunt. Day was a particularly reprehensible member of the House who sent Adolf Hitler a congratulatory telegram upon der Fuhrer assuming power in 1933. Day also knowingly collaborated with Nazi German agent George Sylvester Viereck to publish the scurrilous book *We Must Save The Republic*. The piece in the *International Teamster* draws a direct line from Day's sympathies for fascism to his anti-union politics. "No doubt Day knew that Hitler rose to power on the corpses of union men," Hunt writes. "No doubt he also knew that Hitler's first act was to disband the labor unions of Germany and imprison their leaders."

It speaks volumes that the Teamsters have gone in full scale retreat from this early opposition to fascism. Sean O'Brien prostrated himself at the Republican National Convention before Trump, a man who has promised to be "a dictator on day one." Politicians like Vance and Hawley look to the autocracy across the Atlantic in Hungary as a model for the kind of society they want to build at home. All of this, to O'Brien, makes them "tough SOBs" who have "been right there with us on all of our issues." They will be tough, that's true enough. But they will be tough on behalf of the big businessmen and large corporations who send them campaign checks, not labor misleaders like Sean O'Brien and certainly not rank and file union members.

"Can a man be a friend of Hitler and a friend of labor at the same time?" That's what Lester Hunt asked in 1944. The answer then was no. One cannot serve two masters, especially when they are so unalterably opposed. It is still true that no one can be a friend of fascism, of reactionary dictatorship, and organized labor. The Teamsters knew the right answer then. It seems they've forgotten it now.