

The Sean O'Brien Show: Take Two

written by Hank Kennedy | February 8, 2025



From as far back as 2012, Sean O'Brien wanted the media spotlight. That year he was the subject of a television pilot for a proposed A&E reality show titled *The Teamsters*, to be produced by Mark Wahlberg. Wahlberg, along with the Afflecks (longtime O'Brien friends), seem attracted to a certain image of the working class: white, male, and macho, the same image idolized by the American right. The series never aired and in 2014, O'Brien's Local 25 was in the news not as the subjects of a reality show, but for yelling racial slurs and threats at the star of one, Padma Lakshmi of *Top Chef*.

That was back when O'Brien was a big fish in a small pond, the President of Local 25 and a member of the union's international executive board. Now, as general president, he can afford to hire a staff to produce his own show. That podcast, *Better Bad Ideas With Sean O'Brien*, debuted January 15th with left-leaning Twitch streamer Hasan Piker as a guest. The second featured a discussion with Christian nationalist U.S. Senator Josh Hawley of Missouri.

The interview was nothing more than a love fest. This isn't surprising. Last year O'Brien posted on Twitter that Hawley's article assailing corporate America for "using [their] profits to push diversity, equity, and inclusion and the religion of the trans flag" was "100% on point." O'Brien wrote his own piece for *Compact*, the publication Hawley's diatribe ran in. It's worth noting that the senior editor of *Compact* had to resign last year due to her promotion of antisemitic conspiracy theories and Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

O'Brien spent much of the interview gushing over Hawley. He runs through the man's career as Missouri Attorney General and in the Senate like a devotee in thrall to a movie star. Under O'Brien, the Teamsters gave \$5,000 to Hawley's 2024 Senate campaign, despite his opposition to the Butch-Lewis Act that bailed out Teamster pensions and his 11% lifetime score from the AFL-CIO. "I'm a big fan," he said, as if listeners couldn't pick up on that fact. O'Brien expressed optimism over Trump's victory, saying for Teamsters "there seems to be a sense of hope out there that didn't exist prior to this election, regardless of the result that happened." Hawley, who denies that Trump fairly lost the 2020 Presidential election, couldn't agree more.

The two find further common ground discussing immigration. "I think the biggest problem," O'Brien said, "is people are trying to protect illegal aliens that come over here and commit crimes." He

continued, "Social issues are all well and good, but protecting illegal immigrants that come into our country to commit crimes and steal jobs, that's a tough pill to swallow." O'Brien's professed distaste for criminals is laughable due to his own history of threatening Teamsters and his local's past as a jobs program for the Boston mob.

O'Brien's xenophobia is part and parcel of a recent turn towards Teamsters solipsism. In a social media post opposing flag burning he declared #usagainsteverybody. One wonders how Canadian Teamsters feel about that one. The Teamsters have begun selling merchandise boasting "Teamsters vs. Everybody." "Everybody" includes the International Association of Machinists. The Teamsters ended a no raid agreement with them last year.

O'Brien's comments are miles away from a true giant of the Irish labor movement, James Connolly. "Let no Irishman throw a stone at the foreigner; he may hit his own clansman. Let no foreigner revile the Irish; he may be vilifying his own stock." O'Brien's anti-immigrant rhetoric is no "better bad idea." Stirring up nativism is a boon to the rich and multinationals, particularly as the Teamsters try to unionize the heavily immigrant Amazon workforce. At the JFK 8 Amazon workforce in Staten Island, the first unionized Amazon warehouse in the country, 50% of the workers are immigrants.

What is the purpose of *Better Bad Ideas*? Given the presence of advertising for blinds.com, the ABC cop drama *The Rookie*, and others, it seems like a moneymaking venture. But if it is meant to further expose Sean O'Brien to the wider public, there are problems. The debut episode with Piker notched over 100,000 views. By contrast, the follow up with Hawley, as of this writing, is stuck below 5,000. This viewership for the president of a union with over a million members. Clearly, it doesn't seem like O'Brien is much of a draw.

This lack of viewership may have been a gift to O'Brien, since when people actually heard what he was saying the response was swift and negative. Teamsters Mobilize, a rank and file movement within the union, put out a statement saying O'Brien's words are "an insult to everyone, especially all Teamsters and children of immigrants. There is no room for nationalism and xenophobia in the Teamsters." Several Teamsters called into the Valley Labor Report taking him further to task for his statements. Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) the reform movement of old released their own statement that the Teamsters fight "for the rights of all Teamsters regardless of their immigration status."

Yet TDU have maintained their "see no evil, hear no evil" attitude as O'Brien has further ingratiated himself with the Trumpian right. Their statement does not mention him. They put out no statements on O'Brien's speech to the RNC, his promotion of Hawley's transphobia, or his piece for a far-right publication generously funded by plutocrat Peter Thiel.

What all of this has made abundantly clear is that O'Brien has not fundamentally changed from the man who took over his local union in 2006 as an anti-reform candidate. He is still following the same script. "We needed to go back to our old-school values," he thundered. The Teamster reform movement, then, needs to go back to its own old school values and drop a bigot like O'Brien.