

Trotskyist Teamsters of the 1930s—an Attempt to Draw the Lessons

June 13, 2014

Review of: Bryan D. Palmer. *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934*. Historical Materialism Book Series. Chicago: Haymarket, 2013. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. Photos. 308 pp.

In 1934, a small group of dissident Communists, followers of Leon Trotsky, led Teamsters Local Union 574 through a series of strikes and emerged victorious, ending the employers' open-shop regime and making Minneapolis a union town. It was one of three important strikes that year—the other two were in San Francisco and Toledo—that signaled the beginning of the great labor upheaval of the 1930s with its sit-down strikes, mass picketlines, and violent confrontation, leading to the organization under the aegis of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) of industrial unions in auto, steel, rubber, and the electrical industry as well as in many other branches of the economy. Overall six million workers were organized by the CIO and the AFL in the 1930s, winning workers union protections, raising wages, improving working conditions, gaining respect from foremen and supervisors, and bringing workers a new sense of self-confidence and pride. Only the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s-1960s rivals the 1930s strikes in significance in modern American history. How could a small group of radicals on the fringes of American society in one second-tier city in the Midwest have played such a crucial role in helping to detonate that momentous development in the American labor movement and society? That is the central question Bryan D. Palmer attempts to answer in his *Revolutionary Teamsters*.

We already have several books on the 1934 Teamster strikes, but Palmer's is distinguished by its focus on the role of the Trotskyist leadership, that is, on the role of revolutionary socialists in the labor movement.[1] Palmer, a Canadian labor historian and Marxist intellectual, describes and analyzes the Trotskyists of the Communist League of America (later the Socialist Workers Party) in the Minneapolis Teamsters, offering an assessment of the group's strengths and weaknesses in both leading one of the most important labor struggles of the era and in dealing with the political parties in Minnesota at the time: Republican, Democrat, and Farmer Labor. His goal, he writes, is to help today's leftists and militant labor unionists draw lessons that can contribute to forging a revolutionary leadership for such labor struggles in the present. Such a book then is obviously of great interest to the American and Canadian left today.

As Palmer himself points out, today the words "revolutionary Teamsters" sound like an oxymoron. The Teamsters union, one of the largest in the United States (as well as in Canada and Puerto Rico), has a well-deserved reputation as a business union—that is, a union both run like a business and operating as a partner of business—with a long history of involvement by organized crime and continuing practices of authoritarianism and the suppression of rank-and-file democracy. In the 1970s Teamster union leaders supported President Nixon, in exchange for banning former President Jimmy Hoffa, Sr. from being involved in union politics and in the 1980s the Teamsters union backed Ronald Reagan—making it an anomaly in the labor movement. Under President Jimmy Hoffa, Jr., in 2008 the Teamsters joined the rest of the unions in backing Barack Obama as it did again in 2012. But it has never supported independent or left wing alternatives. These were hardly the politics of "revolutionary Teamsters. Yet, as Palmer reminds us, it was the Trotskyists, revolutionary socialists, who in 1933 and 1934 led coal drivers and then freight drivers to win union recognition in Minneapolis and then went on between 1934 and 1940 to organized tens of thousands of other truck drivers, warehouse workers, and other laborers throughout the old Northwest Territory—winning

higher wages along the way—and laying the basis for the transformation of the Teamsters into an industrial union.

Palmer's book on the Teamsters grew out of research he carried out to write his biography of an American Trotskyist leader, *James P. Cannon and the origins of the American revolutionary left, 1890-1928*, in the course of which he unearthed previously unexamined papers about the role of Cannon and the CLA/SWP in the 1934 Teamsters strikes. *Revolutionary Teamsters* begins with a brief account of the two other major strikes of 1934, the San Francisco longshoremens' strike led by Harry Bridges and the Communist Party and the Toledo Autolite led by the Socialist Party. Palmer then writes a detailed and dense narrative of the Minneapolis strikes by coal yard workers and freight drivers that describes and analyzes all of the forces involved in them, from the Teamsters Union to the employers' Citizens Alliance, from their opponents in the Communist Party and in Governor Floyd Olson and his Farmer-Labor Party. The book's final sections deal briefly with the union's regional expansion in the years from 1934 to 1940 and its suppression by the administration of Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt, eradicating the Trotskyist presence in the Teamsters in that era. Finally the book concludes by drawing some very general lessons for today's activists and there is an appendix which provides a short account of the American Trotskyists at that time.

Most of the Trotskyists in Minneapolis who organized and led Teamsters Local 574 had long histories in the labor movement and in the left. Vincent R. (Ray) Dunne and Carl Skoglund, for example, had been involved in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and in the Communist Party (known in the early 1920s as the Workers Party), and had subsequently joined the Trotskyist Communist League of America. Others like Farrell Dobbs were recruited to the CLA in the course of its Teamster organizing. The Trotskyists first organized a strike in the coal yards and then, having won union recognition and a contract there, found an ally in William S. (Bill) Brown, the president of the local union. Working with him, and despite opposition from Daniel Tobin, general president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, they launched a drive to organize the truck drivers and make Minneapolis a union town. Without going into all of the details here, suffice it to say that the Trotskyists in leading the freight strikes created a highly disciplined and effective organization that at times in its violent confrontation with the Citizens Alliance's deputized thugs and the local police took on a quasi-military character, capable of mobilizing hundreds of workers in pitched street battles and in calling thousands to mass rallies. It was not, however, brute force and violence that won the battle, but rather strategic savvy in choosing the right issue, the right moment, and the right tactic.

In passing, Palmer sketches rather one-dimensional portraits of the Trotskyist Teamster leaders, mentions briefly the Teamsters Women's Auxiliary, but without really getting into the experience of women, and neglects the one opportunity to deal with racial issues which is provided by the several native American truck drivers (there being few African Americans or Latinos in Minneapolis at the time). The holy trinity of contemporary history and social sciences—race, gender, and class—does not have much sway in this book. Nor is there much more than a sketch of economic or social history. Palmer's is an old school, leftist, labor history, an account of a strike movement, focusing on the union, the left, and party politics. Palmer wants to understand the degree to which a group of Trotskyists operating in the Teamsters union succeeded or failed in carrying out a revolutionary strategy.

Palmer, however, describes the Trotskyist leadership's functioning in Local 574 to only a limited degree; we know that the Trotskyist core cadres are making the decisions, but we don't really learn how they operated. Did they make decisions first in their cell, fraction, or branch and then work to convince their allies like Brown and others? Or did they make those decisions together with the worker leaders and activists closest to them? Such things are difficult to reconstruct, even with the documents that Palmer has at his disposal, but they are crucial questions that tell us something

about the Trotskyists' conception of the party, of leadership, of collaboration and of democracy. The author also describes the role of the CLA leadership — Cannon, Max Shachtman, and others — who traveled to Minneapolis to provide their skills as journalists, organizers, and especially as political advisors. Cannon in particular brought to bear his long experience as a labor organizer who could offer strategic and tactical advice. Still, one would like to know how party leaders interacted with local Trotskyists-Teamster leaders, relationships which don't come off clearly in this account and may not be something that we can reconstruct. Perhaps only a personal diary, journal, or memoir could provide us with an account that would satisfy our curiosity.

One of the most interesting things about the Trotskyist Teamster leadership is the degree to which they evaded and ignored both local and national Teamster organizational structures, roles, and rules and simply built a radical, fighting leadership at the core of the local trucking industry. While part of the International Brother of Teamsters, their rank-and-file organization maintained a remarkable degree of autonomy from the national and local union, until they had the power to take over and dominate the local union. When later they fell afoul of Teamster President Dan Tobin and their union lost its Teamster charter, they eventually joined the newly created Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), but then, when the opportunity presented itself, they later rejoined the Teamsters, merging with another local that had been created during their brief absence. It is clear that they had no organizational fetishes, but rather created or seized upon whatever organization proved useful to their strategic goal of organizing the Minneapolis and later the Northwest regional trucking industry. One is reminded of how—as described by Wyndam Mortimer in *Organize: My Life as a Union Man* (1971)—the Communists in the auto workers union worked in the company unions, the AFL Federal locals, and then in the UAW-CIO, seizing up any opportunity to build their rank-and-file group.

Palmer praises the Trotskyist-Teamsters for their political principles and strategic wisdom, as well as for their obvious strength of character and courage in the face of slander and violence. Yet, he is not uncritical of this “steeled cohort” (p. 272) that he admires so much. He faults the Trotskyists for two things, one at the level of labor unionism and the other at the level of politics. At the level of union strategy Palmer argues that while the Trotskyists were initially far in advance of the conservative union officials in Minneapolis in 1933-34, by the mid- to late-1930s as they began organizing on the regional level, they found themselves dealing with a different sort of union leader. “...Trotskyists found themselves more and more aligned with progressive, but decidedly mainstream, labor-officials.” (p. 234) Palmer writes:

Rather than utilizing ongoing struggles to build militant class-struggle caucuses in the distant locales where interested organizing campaigns were being launched, the Minneapolis trade union leaders tended, instead, to forge relationships with established IBT union-leaderships. This was the easiest path to follow, and it produced tangible short-term gains. The result, however, was that a rank-and-file, infused with radical currents, steeled in struggle, and trusting of a revolutionary leadership, did not cohere as it had in Minneapolis in 1934. (p. 234)

The upshot was that, “Each step in this seemingly benign direction solidified the labor-movement credentials of Trotskyist union-leaders like Dobbs, but moved them further away from their capacity to promote the revolutionary politics of Left Oppositionists [i.e., Trotskyists].” (p. 235) He goes on:

It was not so much that what the Trotskyist advance-guard in the Minneapolis labor-movement did was wrong; rather it was what it did not do clearly enough that proved

troubling. Channeling their energies into consolidating 'united fronts' from above with various trade-union leaders, and concentrating their activity on trade-union questions alone, Minneapolis Trotskyists lost an important part of the revolutionary momentum that could have cultivated radicalizing rank-and-file caucuses through which revolutionary politics would have been extended among insurgent workers. This alone could have saved and preserved the victory of 1934. But it was not to be. (p. 235)

He concludes that:

The more the Left Opposition within the IBT succeeded, then, the more it seemed to be boxed into making accommodations with forces that had, in any case, adapted to a more liberal, if often bureaucratized stand. Unable to shift political gears sufficiently deftly and utilize the all-too-often meagre resources to develop left-caucuses and mass support within the union locals that they were promoting and working with, the Minneapolis Trotskyists thus found it increasingly difficult to differentiate themselves from 'progressive,' but defiantly non-revolutionary, figures within established trade-union officialdoms. The localized base of the Minneapolis revolutionary teamster-leadership, as important as it had become, was unable to actually reach into the kind of broad regional and national development that would have been necessary for the Trotskyists among the teamsters to have been protected from the kind of attack that was entirely possible in the changed climate of Roosevelt's third, wartime, term as President. (pp. 238-39)

Palmer, it seems to me, more or less refutes his own criticism when he mentions the Trotskyist group's "meager resources," to which he might have added their small numbers and lack of broader influence in the union movement and society. The organization of caucuses in far-flung local unions throughout the upper Midwest and Great Plains states and then throughout the country would have required a much bigger organization in the union and a far larger political party, and with or without such union and party organizations it would have taken time—time during which the organized union base in Minneapolis might well have been destroyed. The Trotskyists would have faced not only the employers, but also ambitious adversaries such as West Coast Teamster leader Dave Beck and Jimmy Hoffa in Detroit. The Trotskyists, moreover, were hated by the bosses, loathed by the Communist Party, despised by the Teamster leadership, and persona non grata with the U.S. government. To say the least, they had few friends. These circumstances led the Trotskyist to ally with progressives or business unionists in order to accomplish the goal of creating regional pattern contracts and building an industrial union in the trucking industry. It is hard to believe, knowing the difficulties they would have faced, that they could have pursued another course, including the course that Palmer suggests, that might have made them more successful than they were.

Secondly, Palmer criticizes the Trotskyist Teamsters for being insufficiently critical and wary of Floyd Olson and the Farmer-Labor Party. Palmer explains that:

Trotskyists like Dunne, Skoglund, and Dobbs knew [that Olson could not be trusted], but they chose [initially], unlike the Communist Party, to focus their early approach to Governor Olson not on his shortcomings, but on placing strategic stress on the Farmer-Labor Party leader's ostensible pro-union sympathies, which could be exploited to build labor-organization among the truckers." (pp. 64-65).

This is a position that Palmer agrees with. He disagrees, however, with the Trotskyists later for

failing to adequately understand and criticize Olson, who would ultimately call in the National Guard to occupy Minneapolis, stop the Teamsters strike, and impose a settlement that included arbitration. Palmer writes, "Stronger stands could have been taken against Olson, his harnessed use of the National Guard, and his duplicitous role in the obvious ambiguities inherent in the settlement, including the nature of arbitration. There is definitely evidence that Dobbs and others seemed to rely, at times, rather naïvely on Olson's assurances." (p. 121). Palmer goes so far as to say that the Trotskyists cultivated illusions in Olson and the Farmer-Labor Party. (p. 236, fn. 11) He argues that the Trotskyists should have criticized the Farmer-Labor Party as a cross-class alliance, and an organization that was, moreover, politically related to the Roosevelt Democratic Party. They should, says Palmer, have advocated more clearly and consistently the organization of a "workers' party." (p. 226) Their failure to do so, he believes, meant that workers had no political alternative, which left the Trotskyists open to their ultimate political repression.

There were throughout the 1930s local labor party efforts and the idea was raised more broadly within the CIO at various points.[2] Yet one has to wonder how successful such an attempt to found a labor or workers' party would have been in Minneapolis, where a nominal labor party—the Farmer-Labor Party—already existed. Attempting to create such a workers party would have been extremely difficult, especially after 1936 when both the Socialists and Communists had gone over to Roosevelt and the Democrats. This is not to say that the effort might not have been worthwhile for propagandistic reasons, but that such a party could have been built in Minnesota or perhaps anywhere in the United States at that time seems dubious to me. Then too there's the question of whether the Trotskyists had the resources both to build caucuses in the unions and to build a workers' party.

I think Palmer's view of the Trotskyists is open to criticism on another more general level. He argues that it was the presence of the Trotskyist revolutionaries which made possible the Teamster victory, where presumably others would have failed. (He actually writes that the Stalinist Communists would certainly have failed - p.262). Yet we know that Communists won a victory in San Francisco as the Socialists did in Toledo. Communists would just a few years later play a major part in organizing the United Auto Workers victory at General Motors, while both Communists and Socialists played central roles in organizing in the steel industry. One might draw the conclusion that workers' attempts to build industrial unions were more likely to succeed if they had a far left leadership of almost any sort. Yet we also know that opportunistic business unionists in the Teamsters led the same sorts of fights in Seattle, Chicago, Detroit, and Boston and they also succeeded in organizing big cities and entire regions of the trucking industry. West Coast Teamster leader Dave Beck, for example, who had organized the Seattle area truck drivers in 1933 and 1934, succeeded between 1935 and 1937 in organizing Los Angeles, until then an open-shop stronghold dominated by the Merchants and Manufacturers Association.[3] Perhaps the key ingredient was a cohesive team of savvy strategists—whatever their politics—who were capable of mobilizing workers and were prepared to engage in the kind of violent confrontations required at that time.

The Trotskyists did bring important elements to their organization of a strike that some others did not: their regular mass meetings and especially their daily strike newspaper. Most important was their political independence from both the Democrats and the Farmer-Labor Party. Still, the question was, perhaps, not so much whether or not workers could fight and win without revolutionary socialist leadership; they clearly did fight and win without it in many situations under various sorts of leaders. The real question is: What sort of union does one get in the end? Does one get a democratic, militant, and socially-conscious union capable of continuing the fight for a socialist society, or does one get a bureaucratic union subordinate to capitalism? Only in a few places—one thinks of the independent Union of All Workers created at Hormel's meatpacking plant in Austin, Minnesota, in 1933—were genuinely independent, democratic, and militant unions created. That

union lasted until the 1980s.[4] Such unions were few and far between.

The American left, labor unions, and workers in the 1930s only partially succeeded in laying the basis for a more democratic, militant, and socialist union movement. They succeeded in creating the CIO, but lost in their attempt to create a labor party and to bring socialism to the United States. By the 1940s, the New Men of Power, as C. Wright Mills called them, were already heading up what had become simply larger bureaucratic business unions.[5] In part this is because of the authoritarianism found on the left, for example the terrible role played by the Socialists in driving out the militants and building a bureaucratic machine in the steel industry.[6] Or consider the one-party state that socialist Walter Reuther established in the United Auto Workers, a ruling party so successful that it continues to run the union to this day. Where Communists became the leaders of local unions, they also built powerful political machines with little toleration for opponents. The Smith Act sedition trials of 1941 eliminated the Trotskyists from the labor movement—we will never know what a Trotskyist-led labor movement might have looked like—and other leftists, even where they built strong unions failed to maintain the labor movement's political independence from the state. The leftist union leaders' *political* decisions, especially the almost universal decision not only by the businesses unionists but also by the Communist and Socialist parties to support World War II, meant that unions, employers, and the government came together in kind of partnership that—together with the Cold War and McCarthyism—laid the basis for the dominance of business unionism in the post-war period.[7]

Palmer's book gives us one more take on the 1934 Teamsters strike in Minneapolis, but because of its all-too-dense narrative, its portraits of Teamster leaders that border on caricature, and its often reading like a political tract from another era, its audience will, I think, be limited to the small field of labor historians and to the (unfortunately) equally small number leftists. If a labor union activist or some young radical were to ask me what to read about the 1934 strike, I would still recommend Farrell Dobbs personal account in *Teamster Rebellion*, a memoir that reads like a radical's strike manual and seems as relevant today as ever.

[1] The books dealing with the 1934 Teamster strike are: Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972). Dobbs also has three other volumes dealing with his Teamster experience. Charles Rumford Walker's *American City: A Rank-and-File History* (New York: Arno Reprint, 1971), originally published in 1937, remains an interesting economic and social history of Minneapolis at the time of the Teamster strikes. Philip A. Korth's *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995) is a rather undigested combination of historical narrative and interesting oral histories. Elizabeth Faue's *Community of Suffering & Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), which also deals with the Teamster strikes, emphasizes women workers and communities, but she is less interested in labor union strategy and politics. Finally, Chapter 3 of Paul Jacobs, *Is Curly Jewish: A Political Self-Portrait Illuminating Three Turbulent Decades of Social Revolt: 1935-1965* (New York: Atheneum, 1965) provides an interesting and amusing account of his several weeks as a Trotskyist youth organizer in Minneapolis during the period of the Teamster strikes.

[2] See Eric Leif Davin, "The Very Last Hurrah? The Defeat of the Labor Party Idea, 1934-36," in Staughton Lynd, ed., *We Are All Leaders: The Alternative Unionism of the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), pp. 117-71.

[3] Donald Garnel, *The Rise of Teamster Power in the West* (Berkeley: University of California,

1972), pp. 146-64.

[4] Peter Rachleff, "Organizing 'Wall to Wall,' The Independent Union of all Workers, 1933-37," in Lynd, ed., *"We Are All Leaders"*, pp. 51-71.

[5] C. Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).

[6] Clinton S. Golden and Harold J. Ruttenberg, *The Dynamics of Industrial Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publisher, 1942). The authors describe how they got rid of the troublemakers who had built the United Steel Workers of America as they constructed the union bureaucracy. Golden was a member and sometimes a leader of the Socialist Party.

[7] The Communist Party officially supported the war, while the Socialist Party did not officially oppose it.

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