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USA

Teamster Election 2021: New Openings, Real Challenges

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BIG CHANGES ARE afoot in one of the largest labor unions in North America. Last November, following a three-year campaign, the Teamsters United (TU) slate led by Sean O'Brien defeated the Teamster Power (TP) slate led by Steve Vairma by a two-to-one margin in the election to determine the top leadership of the 1.3-million-member International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT).

Vairma, head of Denver Local 455, had received the endorsement of outgoing incumbent James P. Hoffa, who did not seek re-election after 23 years in office. O'Brien, head of Boston Local 25, had the backing of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), the rank-and-file reform movement in the Teamsters.

Although the election was not widely reported, even in a year when workers and their unions managed to make some headlines, it could be one of the most consequential events in recent years for shaping the future of the U.S. labor movement. With members located throughout the transportation and logistics sector, Teamsters can exert power all along the supply chain.

That leverage makes them an essential part of any strategy for rebuilding labor's power, including perhaps the biggest challenge of all: organizing Amazon.

But under Hoffa, that power has remained more potential than actual. His leadership has been characterized more by concessions and cutbacks than organizing and fightbacks. O'Brien and Teamsters United promised something different, a more militant approach to building union power. As they take the helm, can we expect them to deliver?

A Mandate for Change

O'Brien's team takes office with a clear mandate for change. TU won across the board, sweeping the Eastern, Central, Southern, and Western regions by wide margins, from 75% in the East to 57% in the West (TU did not field candidates for the Teamsters Canada positions on the General Executive Board).

The margin of victory was much higher for TU among members covered by national contracts like UPS, freight, and carhaul, often upwards of 80-85%.

TU candidates also did much better than TP candidates [in their home locals](#), representing 171,000 members, while TP candidates got just 66% in their locals, representing 165,000 members. Three TP candidates actually lost the vote in their home local.

Overall turnout was low at 15%, continuing [trend of steady decline](#) in recent decades. By comparison, turnout was 23% in 2001, 18% in 2006 and 2011, and 15.5% in 2016.

Not surprisingly this varied by industry, with turnout among members working under nationally negotiated master contracts at over 20%, but well below average among members covered by so-called "white paper" or locally negotiated contracts.

Focusing on aggregate turnout, however, hides the fact that the 2021 election was [a tale of two turnouts](#). The decline from 2016 was entirely a result of the collapse of the Hoffa vote.

O'Brien actually got more votes than the reform challenger in 2016, Louisville Local 89 head Fred Zuckerman: 115,573 in 2021 vs. 96,377 in 2016, a gain of 19,196 votes or nearly 20%. Meanwhile the Hoffa/Vairma vote collapsed, from 102,401 in 2016 to 58,012 in 2021 — a fall of 44,389, or more than 43%.

Looking again at candidate home locals, average turnout among the 165,000 members in locals led by TP candidates was 13%, while the average turnout among the 171,000 members in locals led by TU candidates was 23%. While nobody should be cheering about less than one-quarter of members turning out to vote, TU was able to generate far more excitement and engagement from Teamster members.

TU's Victory: What It Is, What It Isn't

Teamsters United's victory was a decisive rebuke of Hoffa's leadership. After 23 years in power, Hoffa's team had run out of gas. The leadership layer beneath him was thin, leaving bland labor statesmen like Vairma and number two candidate Ron Herrera to pick up the baton.

The Hoffa regime had [been in decline](#) for many years, but it was his handling of the 2018 UPS contract that galvanized support for TU and created the conditions for what is an all-too-rare event in the U.S. labor movement: a situation where a challenger defeated an incumbent regime in a membership election.

After UPS members voted down a contract that entrenched [two-tier driver positions](#) among other concessions, Hoffa and his parcel division director Denis Taylor [imposed the agreement](#) anyway, citing an arcane section of the Teamster constitution that required [two-thirds of voters](#) to reject the contract in cases where turnout was below 50%. UPS members channeled their anger into campaigning for TU, leading to the slate's blowout margins at UPS.

But the results were not just a vote against Hoffa. They were a vote for a different, more militant model of unionism. While Vairma and Herrera touted their political connections and "smart strategies" that didn't involve a lot of tough talk and table-banging, O'Brien and his running-mate, 2016 reform standard-bearer Fred Zuckerman, openly called for more strikes and more confrontation with employers during the campaign.

"We're going to be a more dynamic, more militant organization," [O'Brien promised](#) during a September 2021 debate with Vairma in Las Vegas. "We're going to take on the fights."

More than anything, the results represent what former TDU National Organizer [Ken Paff](#) likened to "opening a door." It creates opportunities for organizing—but only if members take the initiative. So rather than stifling member initiative, as we have seen under Hoffa, an O'Brien administration is less likely to stand in the way.

Paff emphasized the importance of member initiative because the TU slate is not strictly speaking a "reform" slate. Rather, it's a coalition slate, including TDU-aligned reform elements and others that are less committed.

It's a different dynamic than previous elections, in that part of the opposition slate represents a split from the incumbent leadership. O'Brien himself was elected in 2011 and 2016 as an Eastern Region VP on Hoffa's slate, and three other TU slate members were previously Hoffa-aligned GEB members (three Teamsters Canada VPs will also

continue in their positions. They were independent of both slates but endorsed Vairma).

O'Brien is not a TDU-style rank-and-file reformer. Indeed, he was a loyal Hoffa lieutenant for many years. In that capacity, he helped to impose contracts and threatened reform challengers to Hoffa-aligned local union officials, most notably in Rhode Island Local 251. There, [in a speech](#) caught on tape in 2014, O'Brien said that anyone running against his ally, incumbent Joe Bairos, would have a "major problem" after the election and would "need to be punished."

The Independent Review Board (IRB), an entity charged with eliminating corruption in the Teamsters, levied a [14-day suspension](#) from all union positions on O'Brien for his actions.

O'Brien has since apologized for his actions, saying that he's "not that guy anymore." In the process, he has won over many of those he wronged in the past. This includes current Local 251 head Matt Taibi, the TDU-aligned reformer who defeated Bairos.

"He reached out to build unity to take on the employers — and we took the olive branch," [said Taibi](#). "Since then, we've stood shoulder to shoulder to win strikes, organizing drives, and contract campaigns."

In a vote of confidence, Taibi joined the TU slate, and will serve as Eastern Region Vice President when O'Brien takes over. Local 251 voted 91% for O'Brien in the 2021 election.

Unlike many other Hoffa loyalists, O'Brien can also point to a bonafide track record of militancy. In a report on the Teamster election in [a freight industry publication](#), an industry executive noted that "[O'Brien] is feared inside UPS for being a no-compromise hardliner. In any situation involving his local [Boston Local 25], [UPS] felt it had no good way to control him."

He tried to bring some of this fighting approach to national negotiations when Hoffa appointed him Parcel Division director after the 2016 election. But after his insistence on a unifying negotiating strategy that involved including Zuckerman, Hoffa's 2016 opponent, on the bargaining committee, Hoffa fired O'Brien, leading to his break with the incumbent administration.

Since then he's continued advocating a militant anti-concessions approach. He was a leading figure in the "vote no" campaign against the 2018 UPS contract. And tellingly, one of his first actions after winning the 2021 election was to fly out to Seattle to [walk the picket line](#) with striking Teamster ready-mix drivers.

TDU and the Necessity of Coalitions

Still, it is fair to ask: why did TDU back such a coalition slate, which includes elements that are far from sympathetic to the aims it has pursued for almost fifty years? Simply put, it was the best available option.

Given the state of Teamster politics in general and the reform movement in particular, a "pure" reform slate was not in the cards — not just in the sense that such a slate would not have had a serious shot at winning, but that there wasn't a large enough layer of reform leadership ready to vie for power.

While it punches well above its weight, as it has for decades, TDU is nowhere near big enough to go it alone. A

coalition slate was the only realistic path forward.

Given that O'Brien and Zuckerman were going to run regardless of TDU's position, there were two alternatives to backing TU. The first would have been to run a third "pure" reform slate with the forces available. The second would have been to abstain from the election. TDU leaders recognized that both alternatives were non-starters.

In terms of running on its own, the reform contingent was too small to field a viable slate. Also, such a slate would only have split the reform/anti-Hoffa vote, potentially paving the way for Hoffa's chosen successor.

As for abstaining, the likely outcome would have been the marginalization if not outright liquidation of TDU as a movement. That's because the layer of Teamster members who orient towards TDU would have simply joined up with TU and/or disengaged entirely. It is impossible to see how TDU would have been able to retain relevance in the union without getting involved in the leadership election.

This kind of calculation is nothing new for TDU. Even with Ron Carey in the 1990s, the first and so far only reform Teamster General President, TDU was always a partner in a coalition.

When Carey was first elected in 1991, in the first direct election of top Teamster officials, TDU had a more prominent role. But this was more out of necessity than due to Carey's political or ideological alignment with TDU.

When Carey first ran, he was a complete outsider, a militant leader of his Queens-based Local 804 who nonetheless voted Republican and had little union experience beyond his home local. With virtually no support among Teamster officials, he had few options for coalition partners, and went with what he could get.

Thanks to heroic grassroots organizing led by TDU, Carey managed to get on the ballot with [15.5 percent of convention delegates](#) backing him. He was able to win in 1991 because of TDU's support, but also because the Teamster old guard [split between two competing slates](#), neither of which fully accepted that there was going to be an election where they would actually have to campaign to win votes from Teamster members.

In that specific context, Carey was able to prevail with a more reform-oriented slate that included several rank-and-file Teamsters. Once in office Carey remained wary of TDU, and indeed expected it to disband after his victory, having achieved the goal of getting him elected.

He continued to rely on TDU's support, particularly as the old guard dug in and sought to undermine Carey's every initiative. But it would be wrong to view this as a political alignment between the two. It was a coalition.

In 1996 when he ran as an incumbent, Carey found more support within the Teamster officialdom. As a result, his electoral coalition shifted, with TDU taking a lesser role.

Carey's new coalition was reflected in his 1996 slate. It still included TDU reformers, but also featured several candidates whose commitment to Teamster reform was questionable at best. Several later ended up getting expelled from the union, and some even went to jail—including one of O'Brien's predecessors as head of Local 25, George Cashman.

Beyond the makeup of his slate, Carey also backed away from TDU-style grassroots campaigning in favor of more traditional big-dollar electioneering. This is what led him to hire the campaign consultants who engaged in the [illegal](#)

[campaign fundraising schemes](#) that ultimately got Carey himself expelled from the Teamsters in 1997 (he was later [cleared of all wrongdoing](#), but [never reinstated](#)).

Despite its reduced role, and misgivings about the new slate, TDU endorsed Carey's re-election bid in 1996. Then, unlike in 1991, he was up against an energized old guard that had unified around its standard-bearer, James P. Hoffa. In a pitched battle, TDU once again played a decisive role in Carey's victory, although the win was overturned due to the abovementioned illegal fundraising schemes.

It was this coalition of TDU-style reformers, sympathetic militants, and old-guard power brokers that was leading the union when Carey orchestrated the 1997 UPS strike, widely recognized as one of the biggest U.S. labor wins in recent decades.

The point of recounting this history is not to besmirch Carey's legacy, nor to second-guess TDU's decisions in the 1990s. Rather, it is to emphasize that efforts to reform the Teamsters in a more militant direction have always involved coalitions with non-reformers.

Going much further back in Teamster history, well before TDU's time, Teamster organizer and Trotskyist leader Farrell Dobbs spoke of the importance of coalition building in his efforts to build the [organizing campaign](#) that ultimately led to the National Master Freight Agreement (NMFA), the contract that transformed the Teamsters into one of the most powerful unions in the U.S.

While never forgetting the importance of the rank and file organizing that helped him [transform the Teamsters](#) in Minneapolis, Dobbs recognized that broadening his campaign to build an industrial union in transportation would require working with some experienced Teamster officials who did not share his vision of unionism, to put it mildly. As he recalled:

There was ample room for contributions from all committee members. Due to their standing within the IBT, older heads could win us allies elsewhere in the movement; they were also able to give practical assistance by drawing upon useful aspects of their past experience. The younger leaders, in turn, compensated for their inexperience in several ways: they contributed energy and militancy to the campaign; they knew the industry and the tricks used by the bosses; and they were close to the union rank and file. In addition, the committee was cemented together by common acceptance of mutually determined objectives, a factor serving to generate a spirit of good will. (Teamster Power, 267-68).

While recognizing the limits of drawing historical analogies, we can also recognize the enduring importance of coalition building in the decades-long effort to advance the Teamster reform project.

What To Expect from Teamsters United?

O'Brien and Teamsters United take office having already [won some important gains](#) for Teamster members at the union's nominating convention last June. Most notably, these include constitutional reforms that:

* Mandate including rank-and-file members on all bargaining committees;

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* Guarantee strike benefits starting on day one instead of making strikers wait a week;

* Close the two-thirds rule loophole that Hoffa used to impose the 2018 UPS contract; and

* Ban imposing contract supplements and riders that have been rejected by the membership (these are addenda to the master contract that cover workers in a particular job or geographic area).

Teamsters United [failed to pass](#) other constitutional reforms at the convention. These included proposals to safeguard the provision that candidates for international office need support from only five percent of convention delegates to be nominated (Hoffa tried to [raise the threshold](#), a move that would have prevented every previous opposition candidate since Ron Carey from getting on the ballot); require that top officers have at least two years' experience as rank and file Teamsters; and close a loophole on salary caps for IBT staff.

Nonetheless, the reforms that did pass mark a sea change from previous Teamster conventions, when reformers' goals consisted simply of getting their slate nominated, and getting out of the convention physically unscathed. Even in 1996, when Carey was the incumbent, Hoffa had a nearly equal number of delegates focused on [derailing the convention](#). This made any substantive discussion of union business or constitutional amendments virtually impossible.

Constitutional amendments aside, the real test of Teamsters United leadership will begin once they take office in March. An early indicator will be negotiations for the national carhaul contract, set to expire on May 31, 2022 after a [one-year extension](#). This is a contract covering 4,000 Teamsters who get cars and trucks from auto plants and rail yards to dealerships.

While it is a relatively small contract, carhaul is a core Teamster industry, and carhaulers are known for their militancy. When Hoffa negotiated the last carhaul contract in 2015, members rejected it by 87%. They then rejected a second deal a year later, and finally [ratified a third agreement](#) in March 2017 that eliminated the concessions in the previous deals.

With carhaul members frustrated by management's efforts to implement [two-tier wage rates](#) and other contract violations, this round of negotiations will be an opportunity for Teamsters United to make good on their promises of militant, no-concessions bargaining.

But the big test for Teamsters United will be the [UPS contract](#), which expires on July 31, 2023. Now covering roughly 310,000 workers in nearly every community across the country, this is not only the [biggest Teamster contract](#); it is the largest private sector union contract in North America. What happens at UPS will have ramifications for the entire U.S. labor movement.

O'Brien has already set out some key goals for the 2023 UPS negotiations: eliminating the two-tier driver classifications that Hoffa allowed; raising part-timers' starting pay from \$14 to \$20 an hour; and reining in subcontracting and so-called "personal vehicle drivers," UPS's attempt to "Uberize" its delivery service.

Members are already talking of the need to [prepare for a strike](#) at UPS. O'Brien has echoed this sentiment, referencing the \$300 million in the IBT strike fund waiting to be used, and promising that "[UPS will be the example](#)." In line with the constitutional reforms he fought for, he has also emphasized rank and file involvement in negotiations.

A key early indicator of O'Brien's approach to UPS will be his pick for IBT Parcel Division Director — the position

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from which Hoffa fired him. Appointing someone with a track record of organizing and aggressive negotiating, perhaps more closely aligned with TDU, could signal that O'Brien intends to put his militant rhetoric into action.

O'Brien has also made clear that he sees the 2023 UPS contract as directly tied to the IBT's ability to organize new workers. As he stated at one of the [candidate forums](#) in September, "if we're negotiating concessionary contracts and we're negotiating substandard agreements, why would any member, why would any person want to join the Teamsters Union?"

Nowhere is this question more urgent than at Amazon, the viciously anti-union global retailer that is fast encroaching on UPS's territory in shipping and logistics. The IBT [passed a resolution](#) to organize Amazon at its convention last year, and both slates emphasized this as a crucial task. But O'Brien promised a [more militant](#) approach. "I want Amazon to know that the Teamsters are coming for them. We're coming for them hard," [he said](#) in October.

Organizing Amazon will necessarily be a long-term project, but it will be impossible without a strong UPS contract. And while it is likely a task for multiple unions, the Teamsters' reach throughout the transportation, logistics, and warehouse industries means that it has a key role to play.

O'Brien now has an opportunity to scale up the campaign beyond the warehouse-by-warehouse approach we have seen so far. Along with the UPS contract, Amazon is likely the task that will define his presidency.

Regardless of what O'Brien does or does not do, the ability to continue transforming the Teamsters depends on an active, organized rank and file. That's where TDU comes in. It has increased its credibility in recent years based on its leadership in organizing the vote-no campaign at UPS in 2018 and helping to deliver Teamsters United's landslide election victory.

Still, cynicism remaining from the 2018 contract imposition specifically, and decades of Hoffa deal-making and detachment more broadly, remain a major barrier to overcome. The opportunity for change in the Teamsters may be here, but the challenge Teamsters now face is how to make that change a reality.

Source: [March-April 2022, ATC 217](#).

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