

# L A B O R

## A blast from the past

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hen Teamster President Ron Carey took the podium to open the union's convention in mid-July, half of the several thousand delegates and visitors erupted in a deafening roar of boos and taunts. The jeering disrupted Archbishop Bevilacqua's prayer and the moment of silence for deceased Teamsters. The ruckus prevailed throughout the convention, leaving voices raspy and rough for days.

The initial outburst set the tone for the convention and symbolized the continuing division in the 1.4 million-member Teamsters union, the largest in the AFL-CIO. The thuggish, intimidating show of force was organized by supporters of James P. Hoffa Jr., son of the union's president from 1958 to 1971 who was known both for the power he wielded and his ties to organized crime. Hoffa, a 55-year-old attorney who has never held an

elected union office or worked as a Teamster except for summer jobs in his college years, is challenging Carey for the presidency. He is backed by the old-guard camp, which hopes to regain its dominance.

The union's presidential election will, in part, be a referendum on the past: Carey, trumpeting progress in "putting members first," as his campaign slogan reads, charges that Hoffa will return the union to its corrupt old ways of putting officers first. Hoffa, denying past corruption, conjures visions of a golden age when Teamsters and other unions had more clout. ("Restore the power" is his slogan.)

The election, by mail ballot of members this November, will not only determine the fate of reform within the Teamsters union but will also be a barometer of the health of the new unionism. Carey, 60, was a crucial backer of John Sweeney's successful bid for the presidency of the AFL-CIO. Under Carey, the Teamsters have become a key leader in forging broad progressive coalitions and in

developing new strategies to fight corporations. Carey has polished the union's public image, eliminating one of the staples of anti-union invective.

The Teamsters' history is less than glorious. Organized crime families controlled several past presidents, and many local union chiefs were either linked to the Mob or otherwise corrupt. In 1991, the federal government negotiated a consent decree with former Teamsters leaders. In exchange for the dismissal of racketeering charges, the union agreed to a government-supervised election and continued oversight by the federal courts and an Independent Review Board (IRB), which has the authority to investigate and discipline wayward officials. Carey, a former leader of a Long Island, N.Y., local of UPS workers, won the presidency in the union's first direct ballot by members. Pledging to clean up the union and to make it serve its members better, Carey swept into office with the backing of a powerful grass-roots movement spearheaded by the two-decade-old Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU).

One of Carey's chief challenges as president has been to get the union's finances into shape. In 1991, with support from one old-guard faction and Carey's small camp, the union convention nearly quadrupled strike benefits without providing new funding. Upon assuming the presidency, Carey discovered that the international had not been living within its dues income for many years and, because of the huge new strike payments, the union's assets were rapidly disappearing. He proposed a dues increase in 1994 but the measure was defeated—in part because of opposition from the old guard and in part because Carey's team did a poor job of justifying it to the membership.

Without this additional revenue, the international had to

***Teamster President Ron Carey struggles to preserve union democracy as Jimmy Hoffa Jr. makes a bid to unseat him.***

By David Moberg  
PHILADELPHIA

pare its expenses. Carey suspended strike benefits, eliminated a costly layer of conferences (a source of perks and power for the old guard), and continued to cut excesses. The modest pre-1991 strike benefits have recently been restored, and the international now lives within its means. Nevertheless, Hoffa still focuses much of his attack on the union's troubled finances under Carey.

A second critical issue has been the balance of power between the international and the various union locals. The Teamsters has long been a decentralized collection of local baronies that control 82 percent of the union's resources. While cutting waste, Carey has greatly beefed up operations at the international level, which had been poorly funded in comparison with other unions.

In a bid to empower the rank and file, Carey massively expanded educational programs and efforts to inform members about their union. The union reached out in particular to neglected groups such as Latinos and women. Carey encouraged more cooperation among locals in bargaining and in developing joint strategies within industries. He expanded the organizing department, which has coordinated national campaigns (such as a successful ongoing drive at Overnite, the largest non-union trucking firm). He has also bolstered local union organizing efforts, and encouraged hundreds of members to volunteer as organizers.

This focus on organizing is now bearing fruit: After 16 years of declining membership, last year the Teamsters finally began to grow again.

After many years of favoring the Republicans, the Teamsters under Carey has become one of the more progressive unions. They are stressing grass-roots issues rather than simply focusing on party politics. (The Teamsters, while acknowledging that Clinton is preferable to Dole, have not formally endorsed the president's re-election.) Carey has brought in a top-notch staff that has crafted new strategies to attack corporations on a variety of fronts. He has turned strikes, for example, into broader community campaigns for justice. He has challenged company executives with stockholder actions. And he has linked up with Mexican truckers to discuss common post-NAFTA strategies and with European unions to pressure foreign transnationals in the United States.

In a tough bargaining climate, Carey has scored some significant gains in major contracts. He blocked the expansion of non-union operations and part-time workers at the major freight-trucking and car-hauling companies, and has won guarantees that workers will be regarded as innocent until proven guilty in discipline cases.

Carey's actions have unleashed new energy among many Teamsters. Tim Buban, a 41-year-old truck driver from Milwaukee, only became involved in the union after Carey was elected. "My life changed," he said. "Before '91, if I showed up to a union meeting with a question, I was told to shut the 'F' up. Now anyone who wants to be a decision-maker in the union can be, and I'm living proof." A year and half ago, Buban successfully ran for local union office with an



**Teamster President Ron Carey**  
greet supporters at a rally in  
Philadelphia last month.

insurgent slate. The new team has since organized 600 new members, "more than the local had organized probably in 25 years," he said.

At his brewery local in Connecticut, Chris Roos had been demoralized by local union officials who once told the company openly that they wouldn't back him in a grievance hearing. After receiving advice from a Carey administration vice president, Roos and others protested the local president's incompetence and forced him to step down. Roos has recently been elected a business agent and trustee. He said his local has filed—and won—more grievances in the past year than in the previous two decades combined. "It turned the whole local around," he said of the ousting of the former local president. "Now the members are getting great representation. It gave us back our union and a



voice to be heard." The international also sent in corporate campaign expert Ron Carver to help in the local's contract fight. As a result, members won their first pension and greatly improved their health coverage. "This was all done through the international," Roos said, "and the members saw that."

Not everyone views the past four and a half years in the same way. Pat Kirkman, a local union officer from Topeka, Kan., didn't support Carey in 1991 and still doesn't. She criticized Carey for proposing a dues increase in 1994 and believes he has wasted the union's money. Also, she charges, he has used the power of his office to silence critics. "He's trusted locals that never should have been trusted, just because they spoke out against him," she says. Kirkman is a devotee of Hoffa. "If he follows through with all his promises," she says, "this union will be restored to the powerful union it once was."

The confrontation at this year's convention was essentially a continuation of the battle between the reformers and old guard. Convention delegates, however, cannot all be easily slotted into one of the two camps. Many of the worst old-guard leaders are gone, removed either by the IRB or by the Carey administration itself. Many local union officials are simply well-meaning "business unionists" who run their own locals as best they can and have little contact with the rest of the union.

During the past five years, Carey has slowly built up support among leaders who were not deeply committed to either reform or the old guard. Reformers have steadily gained more local offices, though TDU has not yet managed to make its presence felt in a majority of locals. A large number of the middle-ground Teamster officials and a few from the "old guard" have rallied behind Carey. Carey maintains that he "extended the olive branch" to his opponents after his election in 1991. Some accepted the offer; others hung back. A good number never ceased to attack him. The hard-core conservatives actively sabotaged Carey's first term in many ways—by refusing to distribute information from the international to members, for example, and by undermining the big trucking contract strike in 1994 and the one-day safety strike against UPS the same year.

Carey has had to perform a tricky balancing act: On the one hand, he has had to inspire members to advance reforms, while on the other, he has had to win over old-guard local leaders who may not fully share a democratic vision. Some Carey supporters think that he should have tried harder initially to recruit the middle-ground officials. On the other hand, some rank-and-file reformers complain that Carey, owing to his olive branch strategy, failed to support them in local elections against the old guard.

Carey's opponents portray him as a dictator, undermining the autonomy of local leaders, retaliating against opponents, driving the union into bankruptcy, and failing to



**Jimmy Hoffa Jr. (left) and Bill Hogan Jr. press the flesh at last month's Teamsters convention.**

deliver on major contracts. They contend he has divided and weakened the union. They accuse him of personal financial misdeeds and suggest that he is controlled by the Mob or by "outsiders" such as the staff he hired from other unions. When the IRB cleared Carey of charges of corruption and links to organized crime in July 1994, his critics simply saw the decision as proof that Carey is a government agent working to destroy the Teamsters.

Carey's critics used the convention to drive home their attacks. Carey has more support than Hoffa among rank-and-file members, but Hoffa is stronger among the local officials, who strongly influence the races that determine convention delegates. Hoffa's battalions were boosted by many officials who ran as uncommitted delegates but secretly supported the challenger. Last year, Carey's camp said

that it feared the old guard would throw its weight around at the convention and try to strip the presidency of its powers. Yet despite those trepidations, the Carey campaign started organizing late, after most delegates were selected.

Armed with a recent poll showing Carey leading by 47 percent to 28 percent among the rank and file, his campaign organizers became more confident of their ability to control the convention. They counted on many fence-sitting local officials deciding to go with the likely winner. Before the convention, more than half the delegates signed a pledge supporting Carey.

In the first vote, however, with floor “whips” with walkie-talkies keeping factions in line, Carey came up a few votes shy of a majority. Suddenly, his camp had to improvise a defensive strategy. Outnumbered, Carey firmly asserted—and sometimes overextended—his powers as the chair. He rushed through, for example, a couple of dubious voice votes. As a result, Carey’s supporters managed to stave off all of the most crippling Hoffa proposals. Attorneys Michael Goldberg and Paul Levy, veteran outside advocates of union democracy who were observing the convention, criticized Carey for several specific rulings. They both, however, found the convention as a whole to be more democratic and open than past conventions.

After a strong showing on the first day, the Hoffa forces lapsed into anarchic disruptions and ill-planned parliamentary battles that further delayed any business. Much of the substantive debate revolved around the balance of power within the union. The Hoffa forces wanted to deeply cut the international union budget and strip the president of authority, especially his power to intervene in local union affairs. The Carey camp countered that a strong international union was needed to advocate on behalf of the local unions since those locals were increasingly facing off against big national and transnational employers.

Carey forces also argued that a powerful international was needed to protect members against abusive and corrupt local officials. “Autonomy is not the issue,” Carey said. “Corruption is.” Arguing for strong measures to combat graft, Carey managed to push through his proposals for an ethics code for pension and health fund trustees, and for a prohibition on members associating with organized crime figures. He has imposed trustees to run more than 60 corrupt locals and used the union’s new Ethical Practices Committee to dump corrupt officials.

While at times worried about appearing to condone corruption, the Hoffa delegates clearly bristled at Carey’s clean-up actions. In one important early vote, the convention reversed the suspension of Frank Wsol, a \$400,000-a-year local official from Chicago and Hoffa’s one-time vice-presidential candidate. The union’s General Executive Board had ruled last April that Wsol and several other local officials had colluded with UPS managers to fire a union member who had criticized Wsol in the Teamsters’ magazine. Despite substantial evidence against Wsol, Hoffa partisans

portrayed him as a victim of a political vendetta.

In an astute political move, Hoffa made an unsuccessful proposal to raise strike benefits. He said the new benefits could be financed by diverting part of the dues payments to the international union into the strike fund. Such a diversion would, not so inadvertently, deeply cut into the international’s staff and Carey’s new programs. Hoffa will now campaign that Carey blocked higher strike payments. Hoffa’s aides, however, admit that the proposed strike fund would not cover a big trucker or UPS strike. Contrary to their claims, it would not even cover routine strike expenses. Hoffa’s method of financing the strike fund would also undermine the corporate campaigns that often replace or reinforce strikes.

Hoffa likes to pose brandishing a clenched fist to evoke the tough-guy Teamster image. He claims that he “learned very well at the hand of my father how to negotiate strong contracts.” But times have changed since Hoffa Sr. was at the helm: All unions were stronger then, when the economy was booming and more of the workforce was organized. In any case, the Teamsters were never strong advocates for all workers. Many local leaders cut “sweetheart” deals with employers and ignored small workplaces. Hoffa Sr.’s success with the trucking industry owed much to industry regulation, which allowed employers to pass on higher contract costs to consumers. He was also able to win strong contracts for truckers because, following the union’s longstanding proposals by socialist leaders in the union, he managed to create a national master freight agreement. Hoffa Jr.’s emphasis on local autonomy, then, runs counter to one of his father’s main achievements.

The vote in November will determine whether the Teamsters go forward with the reform efforts or revert to old habits. Although Hoffa has tried to shed the old-guard image, he can’t hide his checkered record, including his past business ties with the slain Teamster Mobster Allen Dorfman and his legal work for Teamster officials found guilty of corruption and Mob ties. The IRB is investigating corruption and possible Mob ties in the Chicago local union of Hoffa’s secretary-treasurer candidate, Bill Hogan Jr., which might knock him off the slate.

Both Hoffa and Carey received enough delegate support at the convention to be on the ballot. While Hoffa outpolled Carey 55 percent to 45 percent, Carey can take some consolation in the fact that he tripled his delegate support from 1991. Although Carey is still believed to have more strength among the rank and file, he should not be complacent. Unlike in 1991, his opponents are unified and fighting hard. Hoffa will be attacking from both left and right—appealing to populist discontent while covertly working to restore to power the remnants of the old guard. Carey, meanwhile, is preoccupied with running the union rather than campaigning. His campaign seems disorganized, lethargic and overconfident. If Hoffa pulls off an upset win, Carey will not be the only loser. ◀



**M E X I C O**

# An opposition coalesces

**The political system is cracking from above as opposition parties gain strength, and from below as popular organizations grow more militant.**

By Fred Rosen  
MEXICO CITY

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he economic crisis—and its political fallout—is making strange bedfellows in Mexico. In late July, 300 members of El Barzón, the country's militant middle-class debtors' movement, held a two-day national conference in the town of La Realidad, Chiapas, under the "protection" of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN). After a day-long internal strategy session, the group met with the Zapatista leadership to discuss future joint actions.

That middle-class farmers—many of them employers of the very people on whose behalf the Zapatistas rose up in arms—would be making such overtures to a guerrilla movement underscores the country's new political situation. To the surprise of many Mexicans, groups are reaching out to one another that only two years ago would have been hopelessly separated by differences of

class, culture and ideology.

El Barzón ("The Harness") was founded in 1993 by a small number of deeply indebted farmers in the western state of Jalisco, in response to the country's skyrocketing interest rates and the banks' imminent repossession of their lands. The farmers called attention to their predicament by blocking highways and city streets with tractors and other farm implements. Currently led by Juan José Quirino, a 35-year-old cattle rancher with leftist sympathies, El Barzón has become a nationwide organization of rural and urban debtors, known for their non-violent, disruptive direct action.

In the closing ceremony of the two-day encounter, Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos asked what it was "that permitted people so different from one another to meet here in La Realidad." And, being Marcos, he answered his own question: "We all know that the principal power responsible has been the government. It has been the government which, through its economic policies, has birthed us, raised us and unified us."

Different sectors of Mexican society have different complaints against the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the official party that has ruled Mexico since 1929. To many Maya of Chiapas, "bad government" means the brutal and corrupt authoritarianism of a non-indigenous elite. To the generally better-off mestizo farmers and a growing number of other Mexicans, brutality and corruption became a pressing issue only when added to the government's current inability to deliver the economic goods.

As Mexico struggles through the 20th month of a period known here simply as "the Crisis," a growing number of Mexicans are blaming the government and its market-oriented economic policies for their poverty. Indebted farmers, archbishops, trade unionists, opposition politicians and indigenous guerrillas now use the word "neoliberalism" almost interchangeably with "bad government."

Until the early 1980s, the Mexican government played an active role in the economy. It protected domestic industry with high tariff and non-tariff barriers to international trade and investment, and it adhered to a policy of "stable development" that attempted to keep prices, interest rates and international exchange rates under control. It also attempted to provide a relatively high degree of social security to Mexican citizens.

In 1983, a year after the Finance Ministry announced a "moratorium" on the country's international debt payments, economic policy took a 180-degree turn. President Miguel de la Madrid, under pressure from the international lending agencies that were helping Mexico make good on its debt, implemented a series of neoliberal economic reforms. Setting a precedent that virtually all of its sister republics in