

# Labor History

**Teamster Power**  
Farrell Dobbs  
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by Edgar Moore

If the reader is to appreciate the full significance of *Teamster Power* he must know something about the author. Farrell Dobbs had middle class aspirations to study political science and law at the University of Minnesota and eventually become a judge to "dispense some justice." He intended to finance his education by operating a small business which never got off the ground. He ended up shoveling coal at the Pittsburgh Coal Company in Minneapolis.

While employed by the Pittsburgh Coal Company, Dobbs met the Dunne Brothers who introduced him to the Teamsters Union and to the Communist Party. Mr. Dobbs went on to become a leader in the Minneapolis Teamster strikes of 1934, Secretary-Treasurer of Teamsters Local 574, an organizer for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), national labor secretary of the Socialist Workers Party, editor of the party paper, *The Militant*, national chairman of the SWP and then national secretary until 1972.

*Teamster Power* is the second of a three part series of books by Farrell Dobbs. It is a recounting of the eleven-state over-the-road organizing drive that laid the

basis for the powerful position now held by the Teamsters Union. *Teamster Rebellion*, the first of the series was published in 1972 by Monad Press. It is an inside account of the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters strikes told by men who were the actual leaders of the strike rather than the elected leadership of Local 574. Work is currently under way on *Teamster Bureaucracy* which will be the concluding work on Teamster struggles.

The reader who wishes to read about corruption within the Teamsters will have to look elsewhere, for the book does not deal with corruption as such. Dave Beck and James R. Hoffa are mentioned only in passing. *Teamster Power* is the story of how the Teamsters Union, under the leadership of a small group of revolutionists, changed from a union organized along the narrow craft union lines of the AFL unions into the largest most powerful labor union in the country.

The book begins at the end of the Minneapolis strike of July and August, 1934. Local 574 had won substantial wage increases for the workers but more important it had won recognition for the union. Local 574 had won a victory over the Citizens Alliance, a trucking industry employer's organization, and had become a major power in the Minnesota labor movement.

In spite of the fact that they had just won a major victory the strike leaders of Local 574 found themselves faced with opposition on three fronts. This opposition

included the Communist Party, the Citizens Alliance and the so-called "labor statesmen" of the IBT and the AFL.

By this time the Communist Party had split itself into two warring factions, the Stalinist and the Trotskyist, to which Dobbs and the leadership of Local 574 belonged. A combination of ultra-left policies and blind factionalism had caused the Stalinists to become unpopular with most workers. Because of this the Communist Party did not prove to be worthy opponents but the manner in which they were dealt with did provide for some interesting reading.

The strike leaders systematically went about the job of defeating their enemies. They gained control of the local by getting themselves elected to office. They then made several fundamental changes in the operation of the local. The union staff members were paid the same wages as truck drivers. An education program was instituted. The rank and file exercised control over the local at union meetings and attendance was compulsory at union grievance meetings. The local developed a three point philosophy, (1) negotiate one year contracts, (2) retain the right to strike to settle grievances, and (3) expand the union to take in as many people as possible including the unemployed.

Daniel J. Tobin, General President of the I.B.T. proved to be a far more effective opponent than the Communist Party. The

strike of July and August 1934 had been an expensive one and the local had fallen behind in payment of per capita taxes to the international union. Tobin used this as an excuse to revoke the Charter of Local 574. The local was forced to fight the employers on one side and the international president on the other. The loss of the charter had no visible effect on the local because they went on negotiating good contracts. Employers soon recognized that Local 574 had the support of the membership with or without the Charter.

Local 574 was finally readmitted to the IBT under the following conditions. The local number was changed from 574 to 544 and the new leadership was to be a coalition of old Local 574 leaders and people who had supported Tobin in the struggle. This did not prove to be an obstacle because the Tobin supporters had begun to show signs of changes in perspectives. Very soon the coalition leadership had welded itself into a well oiled unit with similar views on what the Teamsters Union should become. The stage was set for the campaign to organize the over-the-road drivers.

The internal union struggle which took place over the over-the-road campaign had legitimate arguments on both sides. The socialist argued that the "labor statesmen" were opposed to the campaign because their positions would no longer be as secure because of the influx of new militant union members. The "labor statesmen" argued

that the union should remain a craft union open only to those persons engaged in the loading and driving of trucks. The final victory came when Tobin was converted to the socialist point of view that any employed person tangentially related to the trucking industry should join the Teamsters.

Prior to this time most long distance freight had been hauled by railroads. Improved highways and better trucking equipment made it possible to ship more goods by truck. Over-the-road drivers were not unionized and worked under severe hardships. Wages were lower than those paid to city drivers, they were required to pay for their own lodging while on the road and were not paid for layover time.

The most exciting part of *Teamster Power* is the blow by blow description of the struggle between the union and the variations of the Citizens Alliance which developed in Fargo, North Dakota, Omaha, Nebraska and Kansas City, Missouri. Dobbs' writing style is so interesting and readable that the reader will feel compelled to complete the book in one evening. The only complaint I have about the style is his tendency to repeatedly use terms such as "rank and file unionists," "bosses," "working class," "class struggle," "capitalist press," and "capitalist class."

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