

# Teamster Power

*Teamster Power* by Farrell Dobbs is a significant and enjoyable book on labor history which is of special interest to Nebraskans. Dobbs tells the story of how the first regional trucking contract was won in 1938-39 and the specific features of the struggle which resulted in that victory. The showdown came in Omaha where all the forces of reaction combined in an attempt to prevent the organizing of truck drivers as they had in 1929, 1931, and in 1933.

The regional organizing drive began following a succession of organizing successes in Minneapolis. These successes spilled over into the region and soon the leaders of the Minneapolis drives were envisioning something on a much larger scale. An area agreement was established which transformed working conditions for truckers in an eleven state region. The agreement was signed by over 1700 trucking companies. Nevertheless, the organizers anticipated some large-scale resistance, particularly "In Iowa, Missouri, South Dakota and, of course, Nebraska."

In Omaha, as soon as the pact was ratified, the Truckers' Association began a general lock-out to prevent the union from striking the companies one by one. The union turned the lock-out into a strike by shutting down every terminal of the Omaha based operators including Lincoln, Grand Island, Norfolk, and Fremont. In Dobbs's words, "To all intents and purposes, we had laid siege to Omaha and the state of Nebraska, like Grant did to Vicksburg." The siege was backed with the threat of a strike and one by one the largest firms in area cities began to sign the contract. First, Sioux Falls, then Des Moines, and finally Kansas City also joined those who had signed the area contract.

As Omaha bosses became more desperate, the intensity of their attacks on the union was increased. From the start the Truckers' Association had the full support of the Omaha Business Men's Association and the World-Herald. They also had the benefit of a state law which outlawed picketing designed to induce others "Not to trade with, buy from, work for" any firm or corporation. The anti-picketing law was used to arrest or harass strikers. Two officers of the local union were arrested in Columbus, Nebraska on the anti-picketing law. They were then charged with carrying concealed weapons and, finally, one was charged with kidnapping. None of the charges, of course, held up. Still, the attack on Nebraska Teamsters was unremitting. Landlords demanded the eviction of strikers and finance companies seized whatever they could. In the words of one driver, "I thought we were striking against the truck operators. It seems we've taken on the Omaha World-Herald, the national bank, the relief office, the police, and most every other boss in town."

Isolated and under heavy financial pressure, individual companies began to urge a settlement. For



a brief period, the Business Men's Association was able to coerce the firms to stand fast. Soon, however, firms began to negotiate directly and on their own. After the first trucker signed (On Time Transfer), it was followed quickly by four other major firms: Watson Brothers, Union Transfer, Red Ball and Daugherty of Sioux City. The last outpost of resistance had fallen and it paved the way for further organizing in Nebraska. As Dobbs summarizes: "For the first time the Omaha Business Men's Association had received a thorough whipping. The myth had been shattered that Nebraska was an impregnable haven for open-shop employers... Every worker militant in the city and the state now understood that the bosses could be beaten."

There are other important lessons in this highly insightful book. The entire early portion of the book is devoted to the difficulties that the Minneapolis local of the Teamsters had with the international union. Dobbs provides a textbook of strategy and tactics for militants who find themselves in that situation. In spite of (or because of) their early organizing successes, the Minneapolis truckers found themselves under attack from Tobin, the president of the IBT. Tobin revoked their charter, red-baited them, called on the services of William Green (the conservative head of the AFL) and finally sent in goon squads to break up the local. At each step of the way, leaders of the local union thoughtfully planned their response. They consistently refused to be panicked into renouncing the IBT and thereby becoming susceptible to the charge of dual unionism. Rather, they continued to seek readmission into the union without abandoning their principles of placing the workers' needs ahead of those of the bosses. Throughout this time, they continued to build and defend the struggles of all