The History of the Teamsters

Teamsters celebrate 90th Anniversary...

Evolution of the IBT
From Owners’ Association
To a Union of Workers

Today the International Brotherhood of Teamsters is the largest union in the AFL-CIO. The strength and success of the IBT reflects the spirit of dedication found in the 1.5 million men and women who are its members.

But few know how the Union began, when it was founded, and why. When considering the history that led to the success of the “New World,” one must remember that behind this progressive, democratic, industrial society stood the worker—building, servicing, and struggling to insure the freedoms that all Americans hold dear.

The beginning of the IBT was influenced by the progressive industrialization of the country. As commercial and industrial enterprises expanded in the last quarter of the 19th Century, there was an increased need for transportation services.

As in New York City before the 1840s, most of the early teamsters nationwide were owner-drivers. They were more concerned with the fees they could charge and the regulations they had to abide by, than with the wages paid to workers.

A large proportion of the organizations set up by the teamsters mirrored the old 18th Century Society of Cartmen of New York and were actually employer organizations, rather than unions of, and for, workers.

For instance, in California the first joint action by teamsters occurred in 1850 in which San Francisco teamsters organized to regulate their rates and limit competition from Australian teamsters who had entered the drayage business. (Drayage was the hauling of heavy loads such as construction material, on a long, low wagon without sides, called a dray.) A similar action (though not against Australian teamsters) occurred in 1857 in Chicago.

Most of the teamster associations formed in the latter half of the 19th Century were short-lived and did not benefit the driver employee.

At that time the teamster was considered an unskilled laborer by most of the public and by the leaders of the newly formed skilled trades unions which made up the AFL. Yet, some of these same leaders recognized the importance of the teamsters.

John Lennon, treasurer in the early days of the AFL, wrote: "There is no industry today that can successfully carry on their (turn to next page)

A REPORTER IN NEW ORLEANS ASKED SAMUEL GOMPERS: “Besides more money and shorter hours, just what does Labor want?” Gompers replied, "What does Labor want? We want more schools and less jails; more books and less arsenals; more learning and less vice; more leisure and less greed; more justice and less revenge..."

HEAVY LOAD: Teamsters hold the reins in transportation of commodities of all kinds. Here, a heavy express wagon is making its way through the streets of the city.

Headquarters
American Federation of Labor
1415-15 G Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20005

Chairs and Members:

A number of local unions have signed this statement to form a national union. Whether a sufficient number will send delegates to the Convention of the American Federation of Labor at Kansas City, December 12-13, will be determined by the votes of the delegates from the various local unions. Whether a sufficient number will vote to form a national union of teamsters. The matter can be determined at the convention.

"I sincerely hope that this will be taken hold of with an unselfish, unsectarian spirit, and that the effort may be successful. In either case your union must be represented at the A.F. of L. Convention, and the formation of a national union may reasonably follow.

With best wishes and hopes for affirmative action on your part, I am,

Sincerely yours,

Samuel Gompers
President A.F. of L.

THE CALL: Gompers sent to teamsters across the country to unite in a national union.
The History of the Teamsters

(from preceding page)

business if the teamster lays down his reins."

Before the Team Drivers’ International Union (TDIU) was established (in 1899), there was no nationwide teamsters union. Some teamsters joined the unions in the industries in which they worked, such as the Brewery Workers (which caused untold jurisdictional problems down the road for many years). But the main objective of these unions in allowing the teamsters to join them was improvement of the conditions of their own "skilled" employees.

In 1898, seven teamsters spoke to AFL President Samuel Gompers about forming a national teamsters union. With his encouragement, they set up nine locals and sent representatives to the next AFL convention. On Jan. 27, 1899, the AFL chartered the TDIU.

During the next few years the TDIU increased both in membership and in the number of affiliated locals. The first local was #1 in Kansas City, Mo. John Callahan of that local was elected the first president of the TDIU.

Although many of the original members of the TDIU were owner-drivers, most of the members were simply drivers and helpers working as employees for team owners. Several of the founders of TDIU were primarily interested in improving the harsh working conditions.

At the turn of the century, teamsters worked six and a half days a week. Some worked the entire week. For instance, in Minneapolis, dairy teamsters worked seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, for $60 a month. In San Francisco, teamsters worked 12- to 18-hour days, seven days a week, for $14 per week. In Chicago, dairy teamsters worked 100 hours a week in the summer and 80 hours a week in the winter.

There were usually just two unpaid recognized holidays; July sheets of ice were new shoes on the horses.

To add extra traction to the teams during heavy snows, they were doubled up. For instance, if a driver normally drove a one-horse rig, he drove a two-horse hitchup through snow.

Additionally, tow teams using chariot-type wagons which were the forerunners of today’s tow trucks, would use chains and ropes to haul out wagons which got stuck in the snow or mud. To protect themselves from rain, snow and sleet, drivers wore a fedora.

Typically, the driver had to care for his horse(s). During the winter the drivers entered unheated stables, only kept warm by the natural body heat of the

OLD NEW YORK: Before unions, store clerks and warehouse workers put in long hours for low pay. Picture above shows buildings on Hudson Street in New York City around 1885.

WORKERS HUDDLE: At one time, there was a brand of cigar called "Labor Union." Historians say it was not until the 1830’s that the term "Trade Union" came into use.

THE GREAT UPHEAVAL: At a labor rally in Chicago’s Haymarket Square, calling for the 8-hour day, a bomb exploded killing seven policemen and four workers. No one is sure who set off the bomb, but four union organizers were hung, and anti-union businessmen and politicians used the "crime" to defeat labor’s just demands.

4th and Christmas. Team owners kept their horses off the street on July 4th because they feared injury to the horses from firecrackers.

Teamsters worked in every sort of weather. Like the mailmen, nothing kept them from their appointed rounds. They drove their teams in the steaming heat of summer, in the bitter cold of winter, in heavy rains, through drifting snow, and on icy roads. Of course, snow tires didn’t exist in those days. The only hope a driver had for extra traction on
The History of the Teamsters

(from preceding page)

horses. In the stifling humidity of the summer months, especially in New York City and certain cities in the Midwest, the horses had to be taken out of the stables (when they weren't working) so they wouldn't overheat inside the barn. Wooden poles were set up in the street, ropes slung between the poles, and the horses were tied to the ropes.

Drivers also had to feed, curry, hitch and unhitch them; clean the stalls; repair and clean the harnesses; burnish the brass fittings; and grease, repair, load and unload the wagons. Drivers were also responsible for bad accounts and for products lost or accidentally destroyed.

Clearly, the teamsters needed a union to promote their interests and TDIU's rapid growth in the next three years reflected that need. It grew from 1,700 members in 1899 to 9,400 in 1901 and to 13,800 members by 1902.

But the future would not bring smooth sailing to the strongly independent-minded teamsters of the TDIU.

The Chicago Group

The most organized groups of teamsters in the TDIU were skilled laborers. They were the first among the nation’s teamsters to establish the principles of craft autonomy and wage unionism. They pioneered negotiations in which some teamsters were able to replace hourly or load rates with guaranteed weekly salaries, and were able to establish the closed shop as a form of union movement.

The closed shop sought by the unions and the open shop sought by the employers had always engendered controversy. One of the best comments upon the controversy was a tongue-in-cheek essay by F. Peter Dunne in the Commercial Telegraphers Journal (and reprinted in the November 1910 Official Teamsters) entitled “Dooley Explains the 'Open Shop.'”

Dunne wrote: “Sure tis a shop where they kape th’ door open to accommodate th’ constant stream of men comin’ in ‘take jobs cheaper than th’min what has th’ jobs... Thru it saves th’ boss money, but he don’t care no more for money than he does for his right eye. It’s all principle wid him. He hates to see men robbed of their independeence...”

Finally fed up with the direction and the perceived weak trade union policies of the TDIU, early in 1902 the Chicago teamsters seceded and set up the rival Teamsters National Union (TNU).

located in Chicago. These teamsters were most concerned with advancing the interests of the teamster wage earner as opposed to the interests of the owner-drivers, and they were also the strongest believers in the doctrines of trade unionism.

The Chicago teamsters were the first to identify the teamster as a skilled craftsman and to remove him from the pol of unsecurity. They also were instrumental in getting the 1899 TDIU convention to adopt a union button and label.

The weaving of the teamster union label and button became an important way in which to both gain members and recognition by other unions.

This was acknowledged by the first IBT President, Cornelius P. Shea, who wrote: “The best and

TEAMSTER STALWARTH Tobin, center, IBT General President, poses with Harry Conway of the Retail Clerks International Protective Association, and John Gillette, Teamster organizer, at the AFL 1910 Convention in Atlantic City, NJ.
The History of the Teamsters

Gompers and John Moffitt of the United Hatters of America, W. D. Ryan of the United Mine Workers, and Dennis Mulcahy of the Amalgamated Wood Workers, began negotiations to try and heal the rift between the TDIU and the TNU at the AFL convention in New Orleans in the fall of 1902. These negotiations led to a joint convention of the TDIU and the TNU in August 1903 in

"Ten years ago there was no organization among the teamsters of the country, and the driver was treated with less consideration by his employer than the horse he drove. The horse was petted and well fed, while the driver and his family often went without the necessities of life. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters has changed all this, and has bettered the condition of the teamsters all over the country. The horse continues to be well treated, and the driver's demands for consideration now are respected." Gompers to the 1903 IBT Convention.

Niagara Falls, New York.

This was the sixth and final convention of the TDIU (the first is considered to have been the organizing meeting called by Gompers in 1898). Amid much mutual antagonism the two organizations agreed to merge and on August 22, 1903, the AFL chartered the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Shea, from the Boston local of the TDIU, was elected president, defeating John Sheridan of Chicago by 605 to 480.

Shea thanked the AFL, saying "the AFL and its organizers have done much to assist us."

(turn to next page)

GRavel HaULeRs brought their specialized vehicles in line with the IBT in 1908 when Astoria, Oregon, teamsters joined the union. As with others in the Brotherhood, the gravel haulers found themselves in need of protection of their interests and rights as workingmen.

(from preceding page)

The TNU had opposed the increase in the TDIU per capita tax from 5 cents a month to 25 cents a month. They attacked the increase as being quite unnecessary and overly expensive for the locals.

An even greater dispute arose over the TDIU's constitutional provision allowing membership to all teamsters, including owner-drivers who did not own more than five teams. The Chicago teamsters felt this provision would allow control of a local to fall into the hands of employers rather than wage-earners. When the Chicago locals were still members of the TDIU they did not follow this constitutional provision and did not allow owner-drivers to join.

When Albert Young, one of the leaders of the Chicago teamsters, was defeated for the office of delegate to the AFL convention, the Chicago locals seceded, because they felt they had little chance to change the direction of the TDIU.

The TNU limited membership to teamsters and helpers; however, they did allow team owners to join, as long as they did not drive the horse again.
The History of the Teamsters

(from preceding page)

Edward L. Turley, the secretary-treasurer of the TNU, was unanimously elected to fill this position in the new IBT.

The national headquarters of the IBT was established in Indianapolis, Indiana, where it remained for the next 50 years.

TNU 'Victory'

The merger was clearly a victory for the TNU, as the per capita tax was dropped from 25 cents to 15 cents and owners of more than one team were deemed ineligible to join the newly unified teamsters union.

The influence of the former TNU members was clearly evident in the new constitution, which read in part:

"The objects of the organization are: to organize and unite under one banner all branches of our craft, to rescue our craft from the low level to which it has fallen, and by mutual efforts to endeavor to place ourselves on a foundation sufficiently strong to resist further encroachments."

In 1904 Shea was unani-

Teamsters celebrate 90th Anniversary...

Facts About the Teamsters Union

The Teamsters Union has more than 600 local unions throughout North America.

There are 44 joint councils within the Teamsters, some of them representing more members than several international unions.

...In 10 states, the Teamsters have established state and multi-state conferences to provide an additional level of service to locals and joint councils. The current state conferences are:

• Arkansas-Oklahoma Conference
• Georgia-Florida Conference
• Illinois Conference
• Indiana Conference
• Iowa Conference
• Kentucky-West Virginia Conference
• Missouri-Kansas Conference
• Ohio Conference
• Pennsylvania Conference
• Texas Conference

There are five major Area Conferences, each embarking a dozen or so states or provinces. These are:

• The Eastern Conference of Teamsters
• The Central Conference of Teamsters
• The Western Conference of Teamsters
• The Southern Conference of Teamsters
• The Canadian Conference of Teamsters

The Teamsters are also organized into trade divisions and conferences. These bodies serve local unions across the country that are bound together in that they bargain in the same industry or work for the same employer in different regions of the continent.

The Teamsters currently have 12 trade divisions, including:

• Aircraft Division
• Automotive, Petroleum, and Allied Trades Division
• Building Material, Construction, Retail Goods, Moving, and Storage Division
• Freight Division
• Industrial Trades Division
• Laundry Division
• Motion Picture and Theatrical Trades Division
• Newspaper Drivers Division
• Parcel and Small Package Trades
• Public Employee Trade Division
• Trade Show and Convention Centers
• Warehouse Division

Teamsters trade conferences focus on a wide range of issues affecting special industries. The current trade conferences in the Teamsters are:

• American Communications Association, Communications Trade Division—IBT
• Bakery Conference—U.S.A. and Canada
• Brewery and Soft Drink Workers Conference—U.S.A. and Canada
• Dairy Conference—U.S.A. and Canada

It is estimated that roughly one-third of the Union's membership is Hispanic and/or African American.

Women represent approximately 20-30 percent of the membership.

The most recent figures for membership distribution indicate the following approximate breakdown:

25%—warehouse
25%—miscellaneous industries (bakeries, breweries, dairy, laundry, newspaper, moving & storage, various other industries)
20%—industrial trades
10%—general freight
8%—service and public sector jobs
7%—building & construction trades
5%—airline industry

"Loyal, United, Strong, the Teamsters stand and strive for the ideals fought by the TDU, for the eternal achievement of the Teamster's Creed. The Teamster's Creed, "We shall not be swayed, neither shall we yield. We shall be true to the Brotherhood. We shall resist injustice, for it must not prevail. In the Brotherhood there is one law: Justice shall reign and the teamster his full share of freedom shall gain."

A 1913 photo showing new cut of ground looking southwest from Canal and Chrystie Streets with teamsters waiting to haul away excavation material during building of Manhattan Bridge.
The History of the Teamsters

(from preceding page)

mously reelected president of the IBT. But in 1905, his margin of victory was very slight. Dissatisfaction with his leadership was growing. For one thing, the press pictured him as a person close to corrupt elements in the union. Also, under his leadership, the treasury dwindled. After Shee's reelection, the first major split within the IBT occurred as a number of New York locals seceded at the 1906 Philadelphia convention and set up the United Teamsters of America (UTA).

Because many of Shee's opponents inside the IBT belonged to locals which had seceded, he was reelected with a large margin in 1906. However, criticism of his leadership grew among loyal IBT members and in 1907 he was narrowly defeated for the presidency by Daniel J. Tobin of Local 25 in Boston by a vote of 104 to 92. Tobin remained president for the next 45 years, the longest tenure in the union's history.

The Teamsters Union survived and grew during its first decade in large part because of the changing economic and social conditions in the United States. Such factors as the closing of the land frontier, increasing urbanization, and the growth of economic insecurity led to a decline of individualism of the American worker, all of which in turn led to an increased need to unionize.

In addition, large waves of immigration into the United States between 1895 and 1910 made workers nervous about losing their jobs and increased their perceived need to protect their jobs from competition from new immigrants.

The growing industrialization of the American economy and the increasing size of businesses led to a breakdown in the personal relationship between employer and employee. Unions offered workers a sanctuary from all these changes and perceived threats and also enabled workers to mix with others facing similar problems to try and improve their conditions.

Union growth and success also depended in large part upon its leaders and the IBT was extremely lucky in having Tobin come along to take the reins of what had been a floundering union.

For the first years of his presidency, Tobin had to contend with rebuilding the treasury and try-

This 1918 1-ton Ford Model TT truck equipped with solid rear tires and worm-gear drive offered some semblance of protection for the driver through the use of detachable storm curtains.

SAMUEL GOMPERS and other leaders of the AFL were instrumental in healing the rift between the TDU and the TNU, which resulted in their 1903 merger into the International Brotherhood of the Teamsters. Cornelius Shee, IBT's first president said, "The AF of L and its organizers have done much to assist us."

Above is a copy of an old trucking bill from a Manhattan company, dated June 9, 1869. Notice that prices were much cheaper back then!

Leaders of the IBT

Since 1905, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters has had nine general presidents: Cornelius Shee of Boston served as president from 1903 to 1907. His successor, Daniel J. Tobin—also of Boston—enjoyed a much longer tenure, from 1907 to 1952.

Less blessed was Dave Beck of Seattle, Washington, the IBT's third general president, who presided over the union for more than five years—from 1952 to 1957, when upon he was succeeded by James "Jimmy" Hoffa of Detroit.

Although Hoffa's reign was cut short after only a decade (from 1957 to 87), his followers, on Hoffa's recommendation, swept into office incumbent vice president Frank Fitzsimmons, also of Detroit. "Fits," as he was popularly known, served as general president until his death in 1981.

Whereupon, Roy L. Williams, director of the Central Conference of Teamsters, was elected his successor. His reign was also short, and upon his resignation in 1983, Jackie Presser was elected president.

Presser served until his death in 1988 and was succeeded by William J. McCarthy, who hailed from the same Boston locale that developed the first IBT president, Cornelius Shee.

McCarthy served until the end of January, 1992, when he was succeeded by Ron Carey, the first president to be elected by the rank and file.

Teamsters celebrate 90th Anniversary...
The History of the Teamsters

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Teamsters in the Freight Industry

Representing over 200,000 workers, the Freight Division is one of the largest trade divisions in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

These Teamsters are covered under the National Master Freight Agreement and under other contracts with over 1,000 independent freight companies. Teamster freight drivers work for common, co., re., and an assortment of specialty carrier companies in every state in the union and every province of Canada.

The Teamsters Union has lost more than 100,000 members in the industry since it was deregulated in 1979.

The National Master Freight Agreement was forged in 1964 by then Teamster General President James R. Hoffa. Since that time, the real purchasing power of workers covered under the agreement has outpaced the rate of inflation by over 25 percent. It currently covers 160,000 Teamster members and serves as the industry standard in setting wages, benefits, and working conditions for drivers, warehouse employees, and other workers in the freight industry.

Often characterized as "one of the best agreements negotiated in many years," the economic package in the 1991-1994 contract represents $2.50 per hour/$100 per week increased cost to the employers on behalf of each Teamster employee. The average hourly wage under the present NMFA is $16.26.

In terms of straight wages, the agreement provides for increases for employees paid by the hour of 50 cents an hour in the first year of the contract and 45 cents the second and third years. Forty percent of the overall economic package is allocated for health and welfare/pension benefits. Employers must contribute an additional $12.00 per week to the benefit funds for each employee.

Non-economic changes in the new contract include important job security improvements, the curbing of subcontracting, new equipment requirements, and safety improvements.

Overwhelmingly embraced by the membership, the current contract won ratification by a 2-to-1 margin.

Tobin made it possible for one of the former UTA leaders to be designated a vice president of the IBT.

These goodwill gestures on the part of Tobin backfired when a sizable independent teamster group called the Incorporated Teamster's Society (ITS) was formed primarily around New York City and New Jersey locals.

Tobin took a hard line against the ITS as he apparently took their secession personally, as opposed to the conciliatory way he

Compromise

Tobin's willingness to compromise and accept back the UTA locals and members without penalties angered some locals which had been loyal to the IBT throughout this bitter internecine quarrel. They felt that Tobin's compromises betrayed their steadfast loyalty and some felt they should have had that loyalty rewarded by being given jurisdiction over some of the former UTA locals and/or members. These locals were particularly irked, when in a show of goodwill and solidarity

Tobin Resigns: In 1928, Tobin (centered second from right, with William Greco seated on his left) resigned from the AFL's Executive Board, shown above. He had been Treasurer for 11 years but found the job of buying and selling money and dealing with banks "purely a cold-blooded proposition." In 1934 he was induced to return to the Executive Board and elected 8th Vice President.
The History of the Teamsters

Teamsters celebrate 90th Anniversary... An Up-to-Date Union In an Era of Transition

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the largest union in the world with 1.5 million members in the United States and Canada, has diversified greatly since its founding in 1928. Originally a union representing team drivers and stablemen, the IBT today includes members in a wide variety of industries such as construction, manufacturing, warehousing, aviation, railroading, the moving industry, civil service, brewing, the teaching profession, office work and police forces. Only a third of the members are engaged in hauling the nation's freight.

One of every nine union members in the U.S. and Canada is a Teamster, and over the 90-year life of the IBT, it has represented more than 70 million workers. When you add their families and others in related industries who've benefited from Teamster contracts, the number becomes astronomical.

The Teamsters claim to have the best contracts in the labor world, with the highest wages and best working conditions. And the union has maintained a tradition of lower strikes than other unions, despite the fact that today more than 60,000 contracts are negotiated each year.

In 1974, the Teamsters claimed a record high of 2.2 million members. But the ravages of deregulation in the trucking and airline industries, and the prevalence and safe, the IBT expanded to include non-drivers (as reflected in its 1910 name change to the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Stablemen and Helpers), and an active leadership role was assumed in the AFL and the international labor movement.

Tobin in effect brought the IBT into the forefront of the labor movement. He was named a member of the executive council of the AFL and became one of its most important and outspoken members. He cemented his friendship with Gompers by serving as his campaign manager in Gompers' tough 1921 election fight with John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers for the presidency of the AFL. (Historians say this may account for Lewis' growing animosity toward the Teamsters.)

Incoming PRESIDENT WOODROW W. WILSON, 1913-1921 (on left) and outgoing PRESIDENT WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT, 1909-1913, on Wilson's Inauguration Day. When Taft was a judge, he issued one of the early injunctions against unions, and Gompers labeled him, "Father of Injunctions." Wilson won the next presidential election and soon put labor at ease by appointing W.B. Wilson, a member of the House Labor Committee and UMWA member, Secretary of Labor. He