

Search



The Real Story of the 20th Century

The working men and women of North America played a crucial role in many of the great changes occurring over the last 100 years in industrialization, transportation and social justice. Their struggles and triumphs shaped the economic, class and social trends more than any other group. The rise of North America's working families into the middle class, the empowerment of workers through collective bargaining and on-the-job protections of health, safety and retirement security lead to the establishment of a powerful voice for workers and dignity in the workplace.

These remarkable gains took place in the short historical space of 100 years due in large part to the courage and determined efforts of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The strong-willed members of this great union made the 20th century the Teamster Century.

The First Teamsters: Building a Union

From colonial times to the turn of the last century, the men who drove horse-drawn wagons formed the backbone of North America's wealth and prosperity. Despite their essential role as guardians of trade—the lifeblood of the economy—they remained unorganized and exploited.

In a teamster's life, work was scarce, jobs were insecure, and poverty was commonplace. In 1900, the typical teamster worked 12-18 hours a day, seven days a week for an average wage of \$2.00 per day. A teamster was expected not only to haul his load, but to also assume liability for bad accounts and for lost or damaged merchandise. The work left teamsters assuming all of the risks with little chance for reward.

In 1901, frustrated and angry drivers banded together to form the Team Drivers International Union (TDIU), with an initial membership of 1,700. The following year, some members broke away, forming a rival group, the Teamsters National Union.

Samuel Gompers, leader of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), was concerned by what he saw as a waste of resources and energy, and convinced the competing unions to meet and work out their differences. Agreeing that they were stronger in solidarity than separately, they re-joined forces to create the International Brotherhood of

Teamsters (IBT) at a joint convention in Niagara Falls, N.Y. in August 1903. Cornelius Shea was elected its first General President.

The early IBT struggled. Labor laws were nonexistent, and companies used anti-trust laws against unions. In 1905, the IBT backed a bloody strike at the Chicago-based Montgomery Ward Company. The strike lasted more than 100 days, tragically took 21 lives, and cost about \$1 million. In the end, Montgomery Ward's cutthroat tactics broke the strike. In the face of this setback and other issues, the union realized changes were needed.

At the 1907 Convention, Dan Tobin, a strong young leader from Local 25 in Boston was elected General President. His leadership, which would guide the Teamsters for the next 45 years, brought new momentum and vision to the fledgling union.

In On The Ground Floor

Tobin saw that technology was radically changing the freight-moving industry. Recognizing the trend and to motorization as more than a passing fad, he set out to organize the fast growing motorized truck delivery industry. He began by organizing motor truck drivers and prevailed on horse and wagon companies to train their drivers in automotive skills. In 1912, Teamsters were part of the first transcontinental delivery of goods by motor truck. The wave of the future was obvious to even the most die-hard traditionalists, and Teamsters had secured themselves a place as leaders of the transition.

For several years, trucks and horses worked some of the same jobs: Teamsters at the reins and at the wheel. Desperate to compete with the new motor carriers, horse-drawn freight firms tried to save money by eliminating feedings for Teamsters horses. Teamsters responded by striking, winning important safeguards for their animals' wellbeing. As further proof of their devotion to their loyal partners, even amid the many changes, Teamsters declared by proclamation at the 1916 Convention that the horse would always be the heart of the union and always remain a part of any badge, button, logo or flag.

Strength In Numbers

Tobin began his term with an aggressive plan to organize. The Teamsters set its sights on bringing the beer wagon drivers, travel haulers and delivery drivers for bakers and confectioners into the union.

Despite the gunfire and bloodshed that often confronted early organizing efforts, Teamsters Union representation led directly to better working conditions. The union won standardized contracts, shorter workweeks, and the right to overtime pay for many workers, including women and minorities.

Prior to World War I Teamsters were instrumental in securing strong contracts for women laundry workers, which included a non-negotiable clause called for equal pay for black and white women on the job. By the time the United States entered the war, Teamsters were calling for equal pay for equal work for all workers, decades before any other organization.

The Great War Brings Recognition to Union

The start of World War I in 1914 eventually led to an industrial boom in the U.S. that helped to drive the relentless organizing efforts of General President Tobin. Teamsters played a crucial role in the war effort. Union members helped secure military success by swiftly moving troops and supplies from ports to battle lines and providing expert knowledge in the maintenance and repair of vehicles. Speeding through France and Germany, American trucks were critical to the allied effort after the U.S. entered the war in 1917. Women joined the ranks of the “motorized” with increasing numbers and kept trucks and supplies moving smoothly in the U.S. while male counterparts were overseas.

Teamsters also played a crucial role in delivering supplies and medicine during the Great Influenza Epidemic of 1918.

Following the war, Tobin emerged as a preeminent U.S. labor leader, and the IBT’s position in the vanguard of the U.S. labor movement was cemented. In 1920, Tobin persuaded the membership to double the per capita assessment charged to all locals, making it possible to raise IBT strike benefits. In addition, the IBT looked across the border and expanded by affiliating with the Canadian Trades and Labour Congress.

By 1925, the union’s treasury had reached \$1 million. The IBT was prosperous enough in 1926 to make a donation of \$5,000 to striking coal miners. But in October 1929, North America’s course changed.

The Depression: Hard Times, Strong Resolve

The catastrophic stock market crash of 1929 triggered a chain of misery and despair in North America. As banks collapsed, the jobless rate jumped from three percent to 25 percent. The depression hit Teamsters locals hard. By 1933, membership rolls hit a Depression-era low of 75,000.

In response, the union redoubled its efforts to organize the over-the-road trucking industry. The keystone of this organizing approach was the control of truck terminals, from which over-the-road truckers could be organized. In just two years, Teamsters membership nearly doubled to 146,000.

U.S. Teamsters embraced President Franklin D. Roosevelt because FDR fought for working families and won passage of a series of legislative initiatives designed to pull the country out of the Depression. He relied heavily on U.S. labor leaders, especially IBT President Dan Tobin, to make his case.

The National Recovery Administration (NRA) was the crux of Roosevelt's plan. It established minimum wages and maximum hours of labor for each industry. Hours were reduced to spread employment over more workers. After the historic Teamsters strike in Minneapolis in 1934, where members stood firm in their belief in workers' rights, despite ongoing brutality by police and thugs hired by a citizens committee, FDR was able to win passage of the landmark National Labor Relations Act. It codified in law workers' rights to collective bargaining and protected them from management interference or intimidation aimed at union activity.

WWII: Sacrificing for Freedom

The Teamsters were an integral part of the Allies' victory in World War II, contributing on the battlefield and on the home front. In 1942, President Roosevelt asked Teamsters General President Dan Tobin to travel to Great Britain and report back on how British unions were helping to win the war. On his return, Tobin urged the U.S. labor movement to emulate the British approach suspending all labor discord in the face of the Axis' threat to world freedom.

The National Conference of Teamsters was formed help meet the economic and military crises facing the U.S. It actively promoted war bonds and organized drives to collect scrap metal and rubber to be used in military supplies. Nationwide, other Teamsters local unions, joint councils, and regional conferences followed suit, raising more than \$2 million in war bonds during the first 18 months of the war.

Teamsters served on the front, too. By 1942, 125,000 Teamsters were in military operations for the Allied forces. The Allied victory would not have been possible without the Teamsters who drove troops to the front. Our members did not hesitate to volunteer for service after the attack on Pearl Harbor, often going down in groups with other members from their locals to sign up together. They served in every branch of the armed forces, engaging in everything from building the Burma Road to landing on the beaches of Normandy. Teamsters won scores of medals for bravery and dedication to duty in all times of crisis, including members who received the highest honor, The Congressional Medal of Honor.

As in WWI, Teamster women did their part for the war effort too. Women took on many jobs previously held only by men and proved they could hold their own in any work setting. Many employers were sorry to lose the women workers when they gave up their jobs to the returning veterans in 1945.

Post War Years: Growth and Power

Following the war, the IBT made sure all Teamster veterans kept their seniority when they returned from the war and went back to work. By 1949, membership topped one million, thanks to organizing in booming post-war industries: the automotive trades, food processing, dairy, and workers servicing vending machines. A decade-long national campaign "Have It Delivered" promoted Teamster freight and delivery services, creating more jobs for members.

Congressional passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in the summer of 1947 was aimed at the heart of the trade union movement as part of management's efforts to reduce labor's influence. The IBT continued to perfect its strategy of creating multi-state bargaining units, area-wide negotiations and control of the trucking terminals to become nearly unbeatable in a sustained job action.

At the 1952 convention, after 45 years at the helm, Tobin announced his retirement. Dave Beck was elected his successor. Over the next five years, the Teamsters grew in members and stronger at the bargaining table. In 1955, a 25-state contract covering all over-the-road and local freight hauling and establishing uniform rates was negotiated.

In 1956, Congress approved the Federal-Aid Highway Act, which created the Interstate Highway System. Beck and other Teamster leaders were key in helping pass this legislation. More than any other single act by the U.S. government, the creation of the Interstate Highway System changed the face of America. Its impact on the American economy—the new jobs it would produce in manufacturing, construction and transportation—was, in a word, phenomenal. And it also coincided with a period of dramatic growth for the Teamsters.

The Glory Years

At the 1957 IBT convention held in Miami Beach, Fla., Jimmy Hoffa was elected President and the membership stood at 1.5 million. He brought a new energy and outlook to the union that fit the changing attitudes in the post-war years.

Despite some legislative assaults, such as the enactment of the Landrum-Griffin Act, the Teamsters grew in size and power from the late '50s to the late '70s. Unions grew and workers prospered as the middle-class reaped the benefits of the New Deal, the post-war surge and collective bargaining. Labor leaders like Teamsters General President Jimmy Hoffa commanded the public spotlight and shaped the debate.

The union used its position to better the lives of hardworking Teamster members. Seeking to expand their political clout, the Teamsters established DRIVE (Democrat, Republican, and Independent Voter Education) in 1959. DRIVE soon became America's largest Political Action Committee (PAC).

In 1964, the National Master Freight Agreement was a watershed event for the Teamsters. It covered 400,000 members employed by some 16,000 trucking companies, and spawned similar bargaining in other Teamster trades and crafts. The Master Freight Agreement moved more workers into the middle class than any other event in labor history.

Teamsters were also at forefront in the battle for social justice. In 1965, the IBT contributed \$25,000 to Dr. Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the union's largest monetary contribution to a social cause of the time. The Teamsters proudly supported Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other advocates for civil rights reform at a time when such actions were considered risky, if not downright dangerous for any organization. Wherever working men and women marched for jobs, civil rights or justice, the Teamsters were there including the unforgettable March on Washington in 1963.

1970s: Growth Slows

By 1973, the economy began to slow, but the Teamsters bucked the trends and continued to better the wages, security, and working conditions of the membership.

Teamster leaders were able to engineer a working alliance with the Nixon White House to safeguard the interests of working men and women during the wage and price controls of the early '70s.

Other advances included a 1975 Master Agricultural Agreement won by the Western Conference, which dramatically improved wages and conditions for more than 30,000 farm workers employed by 175 separate growers. In 1976, Teamsters membership topped the two million mark.

Against The Tide

With the landslide election of Ronald Reagan, the labor movement's fortunes changed. Starting with his busting of the "PATCO" air traffic controllers union in 1981, Reagan waged a wholesale assault on labor unions.

The Reagan-era bureaucrats also further implemented trucking deregulation started in the late 1970s, causing steady decline in the Teamsters' membership rolls for the first time since the depression. With each year, big business lobbyists eroded labor law and took the teeth out of its enforcement. The Teamsters joined the rest of the labor movement on a slide that led many to start writing unions' premature obituaries.

In response to the legislative assault on unions, the Teamsters renewed the focus on DRIVE, and America's largest and most powerful political action committee set to work defeating those in the pockets of big business and electing friends of working families.

However, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, all of labor continued to be hit hard with anti-labor legislation, economic turmoil and a decline in morale. Teamsters were not immune to this lack of unity; direction and strong leadership brought trouble to the once unstoppable union.

New Beginnings

In 1997, the Teamsters' successful strike at UPS sparked resurgence in the labor movement. Then in 1998, a new era in Teamsters history opened. Under the banner of restoring Teamsters pride and strength, James P. Hoffa won a landslide victory. At the joint council and local level, the Hoffa message turned into quick action. It was time to pull together, restore unity and organize.

Within a year, the Teamsters could be proud of many accomplishments. Bankruptcy was no longer a danger, a landmark national carhaul agreement won the support of 80 percent of the members, and the beginnings of an in-house anti-corruption effort had been established.

The 2001 Convention showed a new Teamsters Union to the world. It showed a union that was unified, energized and ready to make the 21st century the workers century. Nearly 1,800 delegates were called upon to tackle complex and daunting challenges facing the union

The most important of these changes was the historic amendment enshrining the concept of “one member, one vote” as a permanent component of the Union’s guiding doctrine, the International Constitution.

The Special Convention, held in April 2002, was a direct response to the resolutions and concerns raised at the 2001 Convention. This unprecedented gathering proved to be a major step toward restoring the strength of the union through the creation of a funding structure that will provide financial stability for decades to come.

Charged with renewed energy, the Teamsters Union once again actively engaged in its long tradition of community service and supporting social causes, including civil rights. At any given time, Teamsters can be found taking the lead in community improvement projects, helping those in need from all walks of life, educational programs and political activities defending the rights of workers.

Teamster members are organizing at a historical pace and negotiating stronger contracts than ever before. Leaders and rank-and-file members recognize that new members are the life-blood of the union. But, they have also focused more attention on one other critical area—our political power. The Union is using this power to help workers get ahead in our economy and make sure all working families have the voice and the influence to ensure that Congress and state leaders also understand and support this goal.

Today’s members, using the same spirit and determination to change the lives of workers everywhere as the early founders, are creating a strong Teamster legacy for the next 100 years.

“We want people to know who we really are. We need to ensure that when people think of Teamsters they never hesitate to think of good wages, benefits, and strong contracts and service to our country and communities. Whatever the situation, whatever the need, Teamsters respond to calls for help immediately. They respond not to gain attention, praise or rewards; they respond because it is the right thing to do.”

—James P. Hoffa, Teamsters General President