

# Teamsters History Highlights

**T**his brief outline of highlights in Teamsters history can be used as part of an educational program or training presentation to your local or as an outreach program to schools and other organizations in your area.

## I. Teamsters Beginnings

### Team Drivers Industry

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- ▲ The work of team drivers and cartmen was difficult, with long hours and poor wages and working conditions. The team drivers began to band together and form local union groups to try and improve their situation.

### AFL Ties

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- ▲ In 1898 Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.), helped to organize local team drivers' unions into the Team Drivers International Union (TDIU). George Innis, who at the time was President of one of the local unions, became the President of the TDIU.

### Creation of IBT

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- ▲ Two opposing factions developed in the TDIU. The “owner faction” believed it was acceptable to have members who owned five or less teams of horses. The “employee faction” believed that only drivers, not owners, should be allowed membership in the union.
- ▲ In 1902 the “owner faction” broke away from the TDIU and formed the Teamsters National Union (TNU) under the leadership of Albert Young.
- ▲ The “employee faction” remained the TDIU under Innis.
- ▲ However, it was not long before the downfall of the TNU began. Albert Young, the TNU leader, had close ties with a ward politician named Driscoll, known for many questionable schemes. This caused dissension in the ranks. Many locals opted to leave the TNU and re-join the TDIU.
- ▲ Samuel Gompers again became involved, and by 1903 had convinced the two factions to meet and discuss terms for amalgamation in a joint TDIU and TNU Convention at Niagara Falls, NY, in 1903.
- ▲ The resulting union became the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, with Innis maintaining the leadership role.
- ▲ The Teamsters opened their headquarters in Indianapolis in 1903.



## IBT General Presidents

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- ▲ **Cornelias Shea**- 1903 of the Team Drivers International Union was elected President of the newly formed International Brotherhood of Teamsters from the merged Team Drivers International Union and the Teamsters National Union.
- ▲ **Daniel Tobin** – 1907 from Teamsters Local 25 in Boston
- ▲ **Dave Beck** – 1952 from Teamsters Local 566 in Seattle
- ▲ **James R. Hoffa** – 1957 from Teamsters Local 299 in Detroit
- ▲ **Frank Fitzsimmons** – 1971 from Teamsters Local 299 in Detroit
- ▲ **George Mock** – 1981 interim General President from Teamsters Local 598 in Orange, CA
- ▲ **Roy Williams** – 1981 from Teamsters Local 41 in Kansas City, Missouri
- ▲ **Jackie Presser** – 1983 from Teamsters Local 507 Cleveland, Ohio
- ▲ **William J. McCarthy** – 1988 from Teamsters Local 25 in Boston, MA
- ▲ **Ron Carey** – 1992 from Teamsters Local 804 in Long Island City, NY
- ▲ **James P. Hoffa** – 1999 from Teamsters Local 614 in Pontiac, Michigan

## II. Teamster Culture

### A. Membership and Social Justice

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- ▲ The Team Driving Industry generally employed men, due to the nature of the work and the long hours involved. The Teamsters Union began primarily as an organization of workingmen, but quickly moved to broaden their horizons to include working women as well.
- ▲ In 1906 the Teamsters began using their national magazine as a forum to call attention to the plight of women, children and minority workers, and demand increased protections for them in the work place.
- ▲ The union began organizing women employees in areas such as the laundry industries as early as 1917. At this time they also pushed for and won equal pay for women workers of all races.
- ▲ The number of women in the union increased significantly at the start of WWI, as women stepped into positions vacated by men serving overseas.
- ▲ The Teamsters adopted the official slogan “Equality of All” in 1917.
- ▲ Teamsters boast of “no color line in our union” prior to WWI.
- ▲ WWII brings another increase in women and minority workers to the union.



- ▲ Teamsters take an active role in civil rights action for minority members long before it becomes a “hot” issue for the rest of the country.
- ▲ The Teamsters are one of the first organizations to offer members help learning English and assistance gaining citizenship.
- ▲ The Union leadership has always felt very strongly that it was essential to have an educated membership. The Teamsters have served as trendsetters in education and training for their members, through magazine articles and debates, specific skill building and safety classes, as well as leadership courses for Stewards and local officers.

## B. Hardship

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- ▲ Work was difficult with much lifting and maneuvering through the cities. Drivers were also required to provide all the care and upkeep of the horses and equipment. The drivers’ days began before sun-up and went past sundown.
- ▲ Hours were long- six or seven days a week, 100 hours a week.
- ▲ Pay was low— \$60 a month for seven days a week, 52 weeks a year.

## C. Relationship with community

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- ▲ Being a Teamster required intelligence and skill that was not appreciated by outsiders.
- ▲ The horse-drawn vehicles were tolerated even though they tied up traffic, and brought noise and pollution.
- ▲ The interaction with the public often created conflict that did not contribute to a positive image for the team drivers’ union.

## D. Lack of Power

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- ▲ The Teamsters were not always thought of as powerful, they were quite weak in the beginning, which was a reflection of the economic conditions present during the early 1900’s.
- ▲ Drivers felt there was no reason to negotiate wage demands through the national union because services were provided locally, and the International Union was not financially stable enough to provide for large strike benefits.
- ▲ Competing factions also caused a great deal of turmoil in the International, taking attention away from local issues, and causing members to question the International Union’s stability.
- ▲ Most of the locals were created before the formation of the IBT; therefore they felt little loyalty to the federated body.



### III. Unionization Prior to the New Deal

- ▲ There were clusters of organized workers in a few industries such as coal mining, construction, railroads, garment manufacturing, and public utilities.
- ▲ Organizing in other industries was hurt by prevailing conditions including open shop drives, anti-labor court decisions, and company unions.
- ▲ The Great Depression was also a major factor, as increased unemployment led to a decreased number of Union members. Fewer than three million organized workers made up less than ten percent of the workforce.
- ▲ Also, there were fewer strikes, as workers were unwilling to risk their jobs due to the economic climate.

### IV. Expansion of the Teamsters

#### A. New Deal Era Legislation

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- ▲ In 1931-1933 the economic and social crisis brought about by the Great Depression generated political unrest that led to laws and government policies that were more labor friendly.
- ▲ The Norris-LaGuardia Act of 1932- passed at the end of Hoover's administration. This legislation limited the use of injunctions to stop strikes and outlawed the "yellow-dog contract," which forced employees to say they would not join a union.
- ▲ The National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933- passed under President Roosevelt. Highlights of this Act were:
  - a. Mandated maximum hours and minimum wages.
  - b. Allowed workers the freedom to choose a union.
  - c. Decreed that workers could not be forced to join a company union.
  - d. It guaranteed collective bargaining rights.
- ▲ The National Labor Relations Act of 1935, also referred to as the Wagner Act. The Supreme Court ruled the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) unconstitutional in 1935, causing Congress to respond with the National Labor Relations Act. The events and outcry from the major strike in Minneapolis in 1934 helped generate much support for the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). Highlights of this Act were:
  - a. Allowed workers the freedom to choose a union.
  - b. It provided for collective bargaining rights.



- c. It prohibited discrimination against those who joined a union.
- d. It provided for the establishment of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The NLRB was authorized to hold elections to enable workers to choose their own union, hear grievances filed against employers, and had the authority to issue cease and desist orders.

## **B. Unionization During the New Deal Era/Revitalization of Organizing**

- ▲ Workers began to protest pay cuts, hour reductions, speed-ups, layoffs, and reduced benefits. Strikes were increasingly called.
- ▲ For the first time, joining a union was seen as patriotic; a way to help the national recovery efforts.
- ▲ Rise in membership
  - a. 1933- approximately 75,000 members
  - b. 1940- approximately 456,000 members
  - c. 1952- more than 1.1 million members

## **C. Growth of the Trucking Industry**

Motor trucks began to replace horse drawn carts in about 1906 and by 1914 there were 100,000 trucks. By the 1930's motorized trucks completely replaced horse drawn carts.

- ▲ Trucking Conditions before the Great Depression were poor. Tires were pure rubber, making the ride bumpy and tire changes frequent. Road conditions were often hazardous. And, in many areas sound roads were yet to be built. As these conditions changed, the over the road trucking industry grew.
- ▲ Trucking conditions after the Great Depression were improved by new pneumatic tires, which made travel easier on the driver and less taxing on the roads. The Depression caused the prices on these new tires to be low enough to be quickly acquired by almost all trucking companies.
- ▲ Businesses changed their purchasing habits.
  - a. The slow pace of business caused many owners to purchase fewer inventories so they could save money on storage.
  - b. To avoid inadequate supply, trucks were needed to transport goods quicker and cheaper than the railroads.



## **D. Fierce Competition led to Organizing Drives**

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- ▲ Competition led to drastic drops in wages, rates, and profits. Overloaded trucks and sleep-deprived drivers became dangerously common.
- ▲ These deteriorating conditions led to organizing drives in order to improve the situation.
- ▲ As local markets became regional, truckers traveling outside of their local areas increased the need for collective bargaining rights.

## **V. Growth of Teamster power through talented new leaders**

Three new, young leaders emerged during the Great Depression and New Deal era: Dave Beck, Farrell Dobbs, and James R. Hoffa

### **A. Dave Beck and the Western US**

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- ▲ Beck was from Seattle. He moved up through Union ranks in his area with various positions including: laundry truck driver, President of Joint Council 28 and Secretary-Treasurer of Local 566. Joint Councils were created to further the members' influence across a broader area.
- ▲ In 1925 IBT President Dan Tobin appointed Beck as an IBT Organizer. He later became an IBT Vice President, and finally was elected IBT General President in 1952.
- ▲ "Business Unionism" was Beck's Doctrine.
  - a. Labor was viewed as a commodity to be sold, with unions applying business principles to get the highest price.
  - b. Expansion from local to state was viewed as key. Efforts were made to draw many locals into Joint Council 28 meetings and then create state councils.
  - c. Beck was one of the first people to realize the importance of organizing the over-the-road truckers and devising a way to deal with the issue of multiple jurisdictions, locals, and states.
  - d. He encouraged locals to participate in multi-local collective bargaining agreements for the over-the-road trucking industry.
  - e. With Beck as the primary architect, a Highway Drivers Council of California was created, followed by the Western Conference of Teamsters in 1937.



## B. Farrell Dobbs and the Central US

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- ▲ Dobbs was from Minnesota and served as Principal Officer of Local 574. Many of his major ideas were centered on local activism and a socialistic economy, which had gained some popularity in the United States during the depression era.
- ▲ A Central States Drivers Council was created by Dobbs as a way to achieve a master contract that would establish identical wages and conditions of employment throughout a multi-state area.
- ▲ He negotiated the 1938 Master Regional Agreement for the Central States Drivers Council and trucking employers.
- ▲ Dobbs' socialist ideas fell from favor, and he left the union. But, he continued to independently write material for the labor movement.

## C. James R. "Jimmy" Hoffa and the Southern/Central US

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- ▲ Jimmy Hoffa began his involvement with the labor movement as a teenager in Detroit during the early 1930s. In a letter he wrote to Josephine, his wife, he stated:
  - a. "At age 14 I went to work full time at a department store for \$8 a week. At age 16 I went to work in a grocery warehouse, Kroger's on Green Street, for 32 cents an hour, half cash and half script. This was in 1932. After being forced to work 12 to 14 hours and being paid only half the time, under a system of punching in and punching out, and not being paid for the waiting which, nevertheless, kept us there, conditions became so bad we young fellows decided we had to do something, so we organized into a loose type of Union, independent, no charter, just an idea in the beginning."
- ▲ After deciding to form a formal union Hoffa went on to say:
  - a. "In the meantime, we had heard of the Teamsters Union. We met with some of the Teamsters and after telling our story, we were given a Teamster charter."
- ▲ Hoffa signed a personal loan to purchase the first Union owned building in Detroit, the home of Local 299. He described the situation in the following way:
 

"Nobody can understand the pride of the members and officers in their building unless he has built something from the ground up and succeeded over all odds. All of this time people were being jailed and beaten; lawsuits and injunctions were happening daily.



Few people of this day and age want to believe all that happened except those who were there and the victims of the forces against labor at that time.”

- ▲ Hoffa soon became a Business Agent for Teamsters Local 299 in Detroit, and was then elected President of the local. He also served as an organizer and President of Joint Council 43, followed by an appointment as a Vice President for the International Union in 1957.
- ▲ In Detroit in 1937 Hoffa began adapting the organizing techniques he had learned from Teamsters in Minnesota. He participated in a 1938 negotiation on behalf of the 70 locals under the Central States Drivers Council, which led to a master regional agreement with several hundred trucking employers in 12 states.
- ▲ A major organizing technique perfected by Hoffa was the “leap frog” organizing approach which extended unionization from unionized companies to non-union companies by having union drivers refuse deliveries to non-union companies. The anti-union Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 eventually outlawed this use of the secondary boycott.
- ▲ Using his knowledge of the Central States Drivers Council he worked to achieve common expiration dates for trucking companies throughout the United States until he could leverage a National Master Freight Agreement.

## VI. Centralization vs. Local Union Autonomy

One of the unique characteristics of the Teamsters Union is the degree to which local unions have maintained a clear level of autonomy in relation to the handling of local union activities. Because of the early organization at the local level and then a combining of forces at the International level (*the term “international” is used because of the expansion of teamster representation into Canada*), local unions originally ceded a limited amount of authority to the International. Over the years this strong local autonomy has been a mixed blessing.

### A. Attempting Change

- ▲ Tobin challenged the autonomy of locals, sometimes successfully, but was usually met with staunch resistance from the local leadership.
- ▲ It became clear to many in the Teamsters’ leadership that a stronger central governing body was needed due to increased over-the-road trucking, and the creation of multi-local and state agreements.





## **B. Moving Towards Centralization under Beck and Hoffa**

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- ▲ The creation of the Western Conference of Teamsters created a unique position for Beck to be in control of an entire region, and prompted Dan Tobin to appoint him as an IBT Vice President in 1940.
- ▲ Hoffa centralized the Southern/Midwest region of the United States in much the same way as Beck had done in the West.
- ▲ Although still met with some opposition, the idea of centralized negotiations was picking up support, as members began to see the advantages of master agreements.

## **VII. Other Key Legislation**

### **A. The Railway Labor Act of 1926**

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- a. Established the rights of workers in the railway industry to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing.
- b. The act was limited to the railway industry because of its central importance to the national economy.
- c. In 1964 the Act was extended to include air transport workers.

### **B. The Norris-LaGuardia Act of 1932**

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- a. Outlawed “yellow dog” contracts between employers and workers in which workers agreed never to join a union.
- b. It also sharply constricted the ability of employers to obtain labor injunctions as strike breaking measures.
- c. And, the Act relieved workers’ leaders of personal criminal and civil liability for acts committed by individual workers unless the leaders themselves were specifically involved.

### **C. Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938**

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- ▲ This legislation set minimum wage limits, compensation for overtime and various important other standards for workers across the board.
- ▲ Although it was often challenged, the Supreme Court upheld the Act in 1941.

### **D. Taft-Hartley Act of 1947**

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- ▲ Allowed right-to-work laws, which made it illegal to require union membership as a condition of employment.
- ▲ Business enterprises in which employees must belong to the union before they can be hired and must remain in the union after they are hired or “closed shops” were made illegal.



- ▲ It also prohibited jurisdictional disputes, sympathy strikes, and secondary boycotts, while establishing standard 80 day “cooling off” periods.

### **E. Landrum Griffin Act of 1959**

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- ▲ Established a bill of rights for individual trade union members in internal union affairs, including the democratic election of leaders.
- ▲ Called for detailed financial reporting and disclosure by unions.
- ▲ Extended prohibitions on secondary acts by workers.

### **F. Civil Rights Act of 1964**

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- ▲ Provided broad based protections for all citizens against discriminations of any kind based on race, color, gender, or religious affiliation.
- ▲ Established new guidelines for hiring employees.

### **G. Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970**

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- ▲ Created three agencies
  - a. OSHA- Occupational Safety and Health Agency- sets and enforces regulations related to the health and safety of workers. Since its creation, the number of work related deaths has decreased 50 percent.
  - b. NIOSH-National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health- conducts research into industry practices related to worker safety.
  - c. OSHRC-Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission- Reviews complaints from individuals or organizations regarding specific practices or procedures in industry that cause concern for workers.

### **H. Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990**

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- ▲ Provided protections regarding the rights of persons with disabilities in all areas of society, including the workplace.
- ▲ Mandated appropriate services and assistance be provided to persons with disabilities.

### **I. Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993**

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- ▲ Mandated that employers must provide eligible employees with up to 12 weeks paid or unpaid leave for the following:
  - ▲ The birth of a child.
  - ▲ The adoption of a child or receiving a foster child.
  - ▲ To care for an immediate family member with a serious health condition.
  - ▲ Time for the employee to receive treatment or recover from a serious health concern.



## XI. Key Organizing Events

- a. 1934- Minnesota Strike. This brought over-the-road truck drivers into the Union for the first time and paved the way for the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA).
- b. 1940s- Macy's organizing campaign.
- c. 1953- Montgomery Wards organizing campaign.
- d. 1964 National Master Freight Agreement. This transferred bargaining from the regional level to the national level and set the tone for future agreements in other industries.

## X. Teamsters Community Involvement

- ▲ 1940's and WWII- Teamsters were very active in all aspects of the war effort at home and abroad, including troop movement and delivery of supplies.
- ▲ 1940's-50's- Teamsters were very active in national and local flood relief efforts around the country.
- ▲ 1954-55- Teamsters help develop and implement a comprehensive program to counter urban blight and encourage renewal in St. Louis.
- ▲ Teamsters spearhead a Hungarian Refugee Clothing Drive.
- ▲ 1958- Local 688 designs a model camp and spa for retiring and recovering workers.
- ▲ 1960's- Teamsters are committed to assisting Israel, holding numerous bond drives and other charitable events.
- ▲ 1962- 26 Locals in JC 53 setup a campaign to raise major funds for Deborah Hospital, a free care nonsectarian institution.
- ▲ Numerous Teamsters participate in civil rights marches around the Country, including the March on Washington in 1963. In 1965 \$25,000 was given to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference led by Martin Luther King Jr.
- ▲ 1970's Peace Corps- Many Teamsters and their families participate in or support Peace Corps programs and activities.
- ▲ James R. Hoffa Scholarship Fund provides scholarships for Teamsters children.
- ▲ DRIVE- Democrat, Republican, Independent Voter Education. The Ladies auxiliary DRIVE program was started in 1959 by Josephine Hoffa as a political action committee. The group grew and became very successful working through grassroots organizing and lobbying to defend and promote workers rights legislation on capital Hill.
- ▲ Teamsters Funds. This includes health and welfare funds and pension funds for all members.

