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Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union

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textile workers were adamant about keeping their industry lily-white, and in the 1960s their local unions often advocated massive resistance strategies to prevent blacks from asserting their civil rights. Given this central, uncomfortable fact, one is not sure how meaningful the similarities are that Salmond draws between the two movements. The problem is not that Salmond avoids this awkward circumstance but he never addresses it fully either.

Finally, there is another irony that haunts the book if one extends Salmond's time span. In each instance, success proved to be hollow or quite different from what the protagonists expected. In the case of textile unionism, the unions finally managed to get a toehold only when the industry began to contract and shed jobs. In the case of civil rights, black voter registration created a realignment that only reproduced the South's conservatism in the new, more powerful form of a resurgent Republican Party. The fruits of victory have been bittersweet for both movements.

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Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union. By David Witwer. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. 298 pp. ISBN 0-252-02825-2, $39.95 (cloth).

Arguably no union in the second half of the twentieth century more completely captured the public imagination and shaped the way organized labor as a whole was perceived by Americans than the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The testimony of Teamster leaders Dave Beck and Jimmy Hoffa before the McClellan committee hearings on union corruption captivated television viewers and crystallized anti-union sentiment in the 1950s. Hoffa's legendary battles with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy provided front page copy for newspapers in the 1960s. The mystery surrounding Hoffa's probable murder at the hands of organized crime figures has engrossed Americans ever since his disappearance in 1975. And the struggle to reform the Teamsters, which saw reformer Ron Carey briefly rise to power within the union before the old guard reconsolidated its control behind Jimmy Hoffa's son, provided perhaps labor's most compelling drama in the 1990s.

Over the decades, the Teamsters became synonymous with labor corruption, and the union's public troubles energized a broad attack on organized labor, eroding its public approval ratings. Yet the headline-grabbing notoriety of the Teamsters consistently distorted perceptions of the union, fostering the notion that union corruption stemmed from the nefarious actions of criminally inclined union leaders and had little to do with the context that shaped labor-management relations in the trucking industry. Until now we have lacked a historical account that weighs all the factors that contributed to the Teamsters' long struggle with corruption—including not only the criminal bent of some key union leaders, but also the culture of collusion that pervaded the trucking industry, the structure of the Teamsters' union, and the role of the state. David Witwer, in this outstanding book, weighs these and other factors as he crafts a complex and compelling narrative history of Teamster corruption and reform efforts. The result is not only the definitive study of its subject, but one of the best volumes on any aspect of U.S. labor history to appear in recent years.

It is hard to decide which of the book's many strengths to single out for mention in a short review. Witwer's research, analysis, and writing all mesh smoothly to produce an unusually enlightening narrative. But three attributes of this book are especially worth noting.

The first is its broad historical perspective. Unlike previous explorations of Teamster scandals, this book does not confine itself to the exploits of Hoffa and Beck. Rather it traces the union's struggles with corruption to its formative years a century ago. It probes the nature of the teaming trade in the industrializing cities of that era, and contemplates both the problems and aspirations of teamsters and the competitive nature of the business they sought to organize. Witwer finds that as early as 1905 the Teamsters were under attack for corruption. But tellingly, he notes, employers initially deployed the term "corruption" to attack not organized crime's influence in the union but rather "the growing power of labor organizations" (22). Teaming trades employers were scarcely less corrupt than labor leaders in their industry—they regularly cut collusive deals with the union intended to undermine their competitors—but they feared the union's growing power, and they found that leveling public charges of corruption was an effective weapon against their labor adversary. Their attacks helped curb the Teamsters' use of sympathy strikes, which, thanks

to a concerted managerial campaign, much of the public came to see as simply a method of shaking down hapless employers. Thus, decades before Hoffa's rise, Witwer demonstrates, employers had successfully laid the groundwork for subsequent attacks on Teamster power by defining corruption in the public mind in a way that shielded their own actions from close scrutiny.

A second strength of the book is its careful analysis of rank-and-file Teamster attitudes toward corruption in the union's leadership. Why did generations of Teamster union members apparently tolerate the criminal activities of some union leaders? Witwer's answer is persuasive: workers' definition of corruption differed from that of employers and the media. "For unionists," he argues, "corruption existed when leaders violated the organization's trust" (43). In other words, Teamster members knew the hard-scrabble business of trucking well enough to understand that collusion was simply endemic to the trade—every bit as deeply rooted in the business culture of trucking as it was in labor's ranks. As long as the union officials who were responsible for building successful organizations in this trade did nothing to betray the rank-and-file's interests or weaken the union by bringing it into damaging disrepute, members tended to back them even when those leaders took advantage of their positions to make money for themselves under the table. Rank-and-file Teamsters usually dismissed outsiders' charges of corruption as thinly veiled attempts to weaken their organization—which in many cases they were.

Still, Teamsters were not indifferent to corruption and did not turn a blind eye to the misdeeds of their leaders when they compromised the interests of the membership. As Witwer effectively shows, Teamsters had a long history of reform efforts that dated from Daniel J. Tobin's successful effort to oust Cornelius P. Shea from the union's presidency in 1907. Yet even Teamster reformers had good reason to be suspicious of most outside efforts to clean up their union. Witwer's treatment of the 1950s hearings chaired by Senator John L. McClellan (D-AR) shows why. The McClellan committee consistently overlooked patterns of employer collusion in its investigation, while characterizing as extortionate militant efforts to pressure non-union employers to sign union contracts. Not surprisingly, the legislation that resulted from these hearings, the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959, went beyond laudable measures to combat union corruption. It also included restrictions on picketing and secondary boycotts that weakened union organizing efforts. As a Chamber of Commerce official put it, "The McClellan hearings gave us the train to ride on; they were the bulldozer clearing the path" (207).

Finally, Witwer's extraordinarily judicious historical sensibility can be credited for this volume's greatest strength. Previous treatments of Teamster corruption have tended to fall into one of two camps, Witwer points out: "moralists" place the blame for corruption on individual union leaders, and "structuralists" ascribe the prevalence of racketeering to the nature of the trucking industry itself. Instead of taking sides in this often simplistic debate, Witwer patiently works through the evidence to come up with an interpretation that defies easy categorization and enlightens on a number of levels. More than most labor historians, Witwer understands how important the battle to shape public opinion has been in determining labor's fate in the United States since World War II. And his story makes clear how decisive the Teamsters' scandals were in sapping public support for union power. Readers of this book will thus come away not only with a firmer grasp of Teamster union history than can be obtained from any other source in print, but also with a clearer understanding of the last century of U.S. labor history. David Witwer's volume on Teamster corruption and reform is not only a smart and informative book, it is an uncommonly wise one.

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