

Labor Upsurge and Liberal Decline:
The Case of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters

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Abstract: Labor movements around the globe are experiencing an uptick the likes of which we haven't seen in decades. Based on existing theories of how social change happens and how the political terrain is shaped, we might expect this labor resurgence to translate into more political opportunities opening up for the left and other social movements. But with some important exceptions, this has not been the case. Instead, we have seen a rise of the far right accompanying the current labor resurgence. Why is this? I argue that a key factor driving the disconnect between labor upsurge and political reform is the transformation and decay of party systems. Historically, political parties served as a “transmission belt” to translate worker protest into political demands, and organized political identities along class lines. In the absence of such a transmission belt, frustrations with existing parties gets refracted, and political identities are reframed in ways that discount class identities and highlight other cleavages, particularly race and immigration. I illustrate this argument through a case study of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), a union that has experienced a dramatic upsurge of labor militancy in recent years, accompanied by a rightward turn of the union’s leadership. The case study identifies key dynamics applicable to the broader pattern of labor upsurge and liberal decline.

Extended Abstract:

The current political moment is characterized by a Dickensian “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times” duality. Looking at “the worst of times,” we find a familiar litany: war, genocide, climate catastrophe, growing inequality, the rise of the far right with its attendant attacks on immigrants, tech billionaires exerting ever more control over our lives, increasingly precarious work, economic instability, the daily provocations of the Trump administration, and more.

This situation is exacerbated by a political system that seems utterly incapable of responding to the “polycrisis” facing the world today. In many cases, it only exacerbates these problems. The macabre necropolitics of Trump, Millei, Orban, and their ilk are the most obvious symptom of this, but the bland establishment politics of Macron, Biden/Harris, Starmer, and Canadian Prime Minister Mark “Elbows Up” Carney are equally devoid of solutions, even if couched in more polite and refined rhetoric.

Meanwhile, at least for labor scholars, there is the “best of [recent] times.” This is because labor movements around the globe are experiencing an uptick the likes of which we haven't seen in decades. This is certainly the case in the United States and Canada, but beyond these two countries, we have also seen significant union mobilization in France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Korea, China, Chile, Brazil, and elsewhere.

In the United States, 2023 saw the largest mobilization of workers in nearly forty years, with the participation of Hollywood screenwriters and actors, workers at the three major automakers, healthcare and education workers across the country, hotel employees in Southern California, and many others. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), which uses a methodology that provides an incomplete measure of strikes, reported that 461,700 workers went on strike in 2023. Aside from 2018, the year of the famous “Red State Revolt” with illegal teacher strikes, you must go back to 1986 to find a higher number. This resurgence of militancy made headlines, with analysts talking about a “Hot Labor Summer” and a “strike season” as the year progressed.

In 2024, the number of strikers fell to 271,500, but with the exception of 2018, 2019, and 2023, this figure remains well above that of any year since 2000. There were major strikes by Boeing machinists, East and West Coast dockworkers, California healthcare workers, and many teacher strikes, many of them illegal. The data for 2025 were recently published, and the number of strikers rose again to 306,800, despite attacks from the Trump administration. Major strikes occurred in healthcare and higher education, as well as another strike at Boeing. Moreover, it appears that union membership rose slightly. Union density, the percentage of non-agricultural workers who are union members, crept up by 0.1 percentage points, from 9.9 percent to 10 percent. This in itself is trivial, but considering that, with the exceptions of 2020 and 2008, when the global pandemic and global economic crisis respectively caused major drops in the denominator of total workers, this was the first time since 1979 that union density did anything but decline.

In Canada, the strike figures were even higher. In 2023, 555,347 workers went on strike in Canada, a country with a population one-tenth that of the United States. While the level of strikes in Canada has not fallen as much as in the United States in recent decades, the number of strikers in 2023 was the fourth highest ever recorded in Canada since 1901. Most of these figures are due to public sector strikes in Quebec last December, which saw 5% of Quebec's population, not just the working population, go on strike. Strikes declined somewhat in 2024, with 468,901 workers striking that year, including major disruptions in the railways, ports, education, Canada Post, and more. Strikes fell again in 2025, with 288,235 workers striking, but this was still at a much higher level than recent years. Air Canada flight attendants strike got the most media coverage, but there were also major strikes at Canada Post (again), among teachers and nurses in Alberta, civil servants in British Columbia, employees of Ontario community colleges, and more.

Taken together, these numbers suggest that there is something promising happening on the labor front, even if the rest of the world seems, in many ways, to be heading for disaster. We can see this as a glimmer of hope in a sea of despair.

But it also raises a political and theoretical challenge. Based on existing theories of how social change happens and how the political terrain is shaped, the labor movement plays a central role. Indeed, scholars identify worker mobilization as one of the key factors driving the expansion of democracy and the welfare state over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. So if labor

movements are on the upswing, we might expect to see more political opportunities opening up for the left and other social movements.

But with some important exceptions, this has not been the case. Instead, we have seen a rise of the far right accompanying the current labor resurgence. Why is this the case? Why has worker mobilization failed to translate into political reforms and a revitalization of the political left?

I argue that a key factor driving the disconnect between labor upsurge and political reform is the transformation and decay of party systems. Historically, political parties with organic links to labor movements served as a “transmission belt” to translate worker protest into political demands. Not only that, they organized political identities along class lines. In the absence of such a transmission belt, frustrations with existing parties gets refracted, and political identities are reframed in ways that discount class identities and highlight other cleavages, particularly race and immigration.

To illustrate the inner workings of this argument, I focus on a case study of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), one of the largest and most occupationally diverse unions in the United States and Canada, with 1.3 million members. While the union has a history of corruption and conservative business unionism, in 2022 a reform coalition took office, led by current General President Sean O’Brien. The coalition brought together elements who had broken from the previous leadership and a rank and file reform movement, Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), with a long track record of fighting for democracy and reform inside the union.

Using 53 semi-structured interviews over four years with key informants, including near-monthly interviews with 18 respondents, along with dozens more informal interviews, fieldwork at union rallies, conferences, and education events, as well as analysis of internal and external IBT and TDU communications, I have tracked the work of the O’Brien administration and the reform coalition since the leadership transition.

The trajectory of the IBT in this time period maps the broader global trend I have described. On the one hand, militancy has increased dramatically. Under the O’Brien administration, there have been XXX strikes involving IBT members, XX% of all strikes in the time period. The IBT organized 70,000 new members in the first two and a half years of the O’Brien administration, as compared to 57,000 in the decade pre-O’Brien.

Beyond the numbers, the union has dramatically ramped up its education and training programs, and has encouraged greater cross-local cooperation to coordinate bargaining strategies against large multinational corporations like Sysco (food service) and First Student (school transportation). While the campaign has been difficult, the Teamsters have been making a bona fide attempt to organize retail giant Amazon. The O’Brien administration has also taken action to remove corrupt local and regional officials, particularly in California.

For its part, TDU’s organizing activity has exploded. Using staff travel expenses as a proxy for organizing activity, these spiked by 330 percent between 2021 and 2022, and have continued to

rise. Meanwhile it began hosting several educational webinars per month enrolling hundreds of rank-and-file Teamsters, and its annual convention has doubled in attendance, from around 300 to over 600.

At the same time, while pursuing a militant approach towards employers within the union O'Brien and others within his leadership coalition have been making alliances with Trump and other elements of the far right. O'Brien famously spoke at the 2024 Republican National Convention, and traveled to Mar A Lago to meet personally with Trump. He later appeared in December 2024 for a very cordial interview on far-right podcaster Tucker Carlson's show. He also invited Republican U.S. Senator Josh Hawley on his own podcast in January 2025 for another amiable exchange, where he spoke of the threat of "illegal immigrants who come into our country to commit crimes and steal jobs." More recently, Texas Teamsters Joint Councils 58 and 80, one of which is headed by Brent Taylor, international vice president for the union's southern region, endorsed Republican Governor Greg Abbott in his campaign for re-election against a Democratic challenger who is herself a union member. O'Brien has been notably silent with regard to Trump's ICE raids which have killed union members, although local union officials in Minneapolis have spoken out against them.

How can we make sense of this disconnect between the Teamsters' militant union mobilization and right-wing political activity? While some critics see O'Brien as a sellout right-wing business unionist, this account misses the genuine turn to militancy and organizing within the union. A somewhat more apt analogy might be a return to the voluntarist transactional politics of the pre-New Deal AFL. But this misses the degree to which the Teamsters are not simply negotiating the best deal with whomever is in power. Their political perspective is guided by a strategic vision shaped by a sense of betrayal on the part of one party, the Democrats, who from their perspective have abandoned their working-class constituency.

In this, the disconnect is symptomatic of a crisis of political representation, with unions like the Teamsters sensing, not without reason, that the party that is supposed to represent their interests no longer does so. As such, we can view the Teamsters' dalliances with the far right as an effort by the union leadership to chart a path of political independence, distorted through the funhouse mirror of the decaying U.S. party system.

In the remainder of the paper, I provide an account of how the parallel trajectories of union mobilization and political action have evolved in the IBT, showing the leadership's changing understanding of its relationship to its members and to the party system. I conclude with reflections on the degree to which the IBT case identifies dynamics that can explain the broader disconnect between labor upsurge and liberal decline observed around the world.