

# **DETROIT REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT RECORDS**

**BOX 15 OF 16**

**FOLDER 24**

**TEAMSTERS UNITED RANK  
AND FILE CLEVELAND**

## TURF

The purpose of this paper is (1) to inform about the rank and file caucus in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Warehousemen, and Helpers (IBT) known as Teamsters United Rank and File (TURF) and to relate some specifics of its history; (2) to relate some of our experiences in the organization. These experiences are by no means definitive and the particular history of TURF may make even these of limited value. But the paper is offered as an effort towards developing a perspective on rank and file caucuses and is not meant to elaborate a hard and fast position on them.

### TEAMSTER MILITANCY

There has been a lot of dissension and turmoil in the Teamsters for many years now. There have been many struggles at the local levels against the bureaucracy. Some fights were against the lack of democracy in the union. Some were against bad contracts. Some were over the refusal of the union to stop scabs. Some were over pensions. Some were against corrupt individuals. Whatever their origins, these efforts have been marked by extreme militance, lack of national coordination, and, more often than not, failure.

Indeed, the only national, coordinated campaign against the IBT leadership has been waged by the U.S. government in its court actions against former IBT presidents Dave Beck and Jimmy Hoffa.

Over the years this dispersed local militance had grown to some organizational forms. Most of these were still on the local level, but there were attempts to gather these together. Some local groupings had managed to coalesce into something called the United Unity Committees which had six affiliates in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and New York. The Cleveland rank and file group had been one of these chapters. It had been the spearhead of the Teamster Wildcat of 1970, which had brought the National Guard out to patrol Ohio's highways prior to the shootings at Kent State. Indeed, the Cleveland group really began to develop a sense of identity during and after this strike.

The Unity Committees had no concrete program, but were generally active around the following issues: (1) criminal activities in union affairs--they were opposed to these not part of them, (2) pensions, (3) Dept. of Transportation (DOT) regulations--they were, and still are, opposed to these. The DOT rules set very rigid health standards for drivers and most men feel that the normal ageing process may disqualify them from driving long before they qualify for pensions. They also state that a driver's road record, even when not on the job, can cause him to lose his road license. They also set up certain safety procedures, but do not demand that the companies allow drivers time to carry them out, so drivers must drive unsafely or be subject to the equivalent of a speed-up. These do not exhaust the gripes against the DOT rules, but are probably the main bones of contention. (4) union democracy.

Another group, headquartered in California, was called 500-at-50 and was geared to the goal of \$500 a month pension at age 50 for all Teamsters. This group launched numerous petition drives and functioned less as a cohesive group than as a phenomenal mailing list. It was centered primarily in the Southwest.

A third group was called the Fraternal Association of Steel Haulers (FASH). This is a group of independent steel haulers (owner-drivers, who do not work for big cartage companies) who organized themselves, starting out from a base in Indiana, and then developed a relationship to the Teamsters. They have more independence from the union because of this and have a much cleared sense of independent action. However, that sense of independence has its problematic side as well for they also maintain a somewhat ambiguous stand towards TURF. They support it and its goals, but do not quite define themselves as being in TURF.

Mostly though, the rank and file groupings were just that--local bunches who had gotten into some scrapes with the union, had shared their gripes and grievances, and just hung on. The one overriding feature of these groupings, indeed of all the groups that have gotten together through TURF so far, is that they are based almost exclusively in trucking and hauling locals which do not constitute a majority of Teamster membership. If TURF is ever to be successful, it must overcome this limitation of its base.

This will be a truly major task. Truck drivers have a kind of arrogance about their trade which is very deep, and it is brutally reinforced by male chauvinism. We do not simply refer here to that whole truck stop-open road-waitresses and women mystique that is celebrated in a lot of country and western music. But concretely, most women who are Teamsters are not drivers. A very large number of the non-driving Teamster members are women workers and office workers in small shops and trucking companies that the Teamster omnivorous organizing drives have gathered into the dues paying fold. As long as truckers consider these jobs and these women "not as important", they become a major source of strength to the status quo forces in the IBT. Their votes can be used as a club against the drivers.

Many TURF members are aware of the problem in an abstract way. A number of them will tell you that the Master Freight Contract of 1970, which led to a spate of wildcats across the country, was only passed because the IBT had non-driving locals vote on it and these people did not understand the issues from a drivers viewpoint, followed the union recommendation, and voted for it. They saw a contract forced on them by others. Yet the lesson of this has not sunk into the total outlook of TURF and, from our experiences, certainly ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ has not altered the sense of individual members very much.

TURF COMES TOGETHER

There was one individual who was key to TURF's coming together and that was Don Vestal, past president of Local 327, Nashville, Tenn. Vestal had been a Hoffa aide who turned against the Master. Why was never clear. He had been fighting the union since the early '60's both to keep his own power in Local 327 and for rank and file demands. Hoffa suspected him of being the turncoat who provided the evidence to the FBI that put him away until Edward Partin was revealed as the one who spilled the beans.

Vestal is very smooth, bright, charismatic, but a real operator. His mere survival in the face of Hoffa's hostility to him is evidence of this, but his organizational goals in battling the IBT were never clear. His culminating move against the IBT bureaucracy came in the spring of 1971 when he filed suit in Federal District Court to stop

the IBT convention scheduled for that summer in Miami. The main grounds Vestal argued for in the suit was that the lack of democracy in the Teamster Constitution made the convention null and void.

Two things resulted from this suit. One, Federal Judge Florence Green ruled that the Teamsters' constitution was undemocratic and had to be re-written, but she would not order the convention halted because of this. Her ruling, however, has given the rank and file movement some hope and a wedge for forcing action against the International. Second, and more importantly, many of the scattered Teamster groupings heard about the suit and came to see Vestal. This brought many people and movements within the union into contact with one another. Many of these had not even known of the existence of the others before this. The idea developed of getting together.

The Unity Committees had a gathering already scheduled for July, 1971 in Toledo, Ohio. It was agreed that all groups would be invited to that meeting to see whether or not it was possible to form one united rank and file group. The meeting was pretty good. A number of groups were wary about joining anything. People had been burned pretty badly, but a fairly large majority noted that a national group should be formed, that it would be called Teamsters United Rank and File (TURF), and that it would hold its founding convention during September, 1971 at Denver, Colorado.

Vestal was the real energizer of this meeting, though he should not get all the credit. Most people were grateful for his lawsuit, but were suspicious of his motives. His strategy to fight the union was through the courts and he kept harping on the need for money for the cases. There was an undercurrent of feeling that he only wanted a group to raise money for his court tests. There was also some feeling against this notion of a battle strategy that saw the courts as the main arena of struggle, but this never emerged into very clear or full debate.

There X were few Black folks at the Toledo meeting, and even fewer Latinos or Indians, but one Black driver from LA brought the race issue to the floor almost immediately. One of the groups in attendance was from Winston-Salem, N.C. and they had been putting out their own newsletter. The issue they brought to Toledo had an article against the Javits pension reform bill because (1) Javits was a communist and (2) the federal government was going to use this money for social purposes like busing. The Black dude stood up and said he wasn't calling anybody racist, but as a trade unionist, if the group wanted to attract all Teamsters, it could not condone material like that. There was a lot of defensive cries of "Don't raise the race question" and "We're not prejudice," etc., but the meeting agreed with the Black driver and the Winston-Salem people walked out.

TURF is hardly an example of militant anti-racism in action, but it did come down on the right side of the issue in spite of its defensiveness. The truth is, however, that TURF is predominantly white organization and is not deeply conscious of racism as an element in the overall struggle. Some local areas have more Black involvement



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now felt that the other two conferences were holding everything back. Vestal's role became very suspicious through all this hostility (which true to Teamster tradition included a punch-up and shoot-out in the course of two executive committee meetings) and a lot of animosity developed against him.

The Eastern and Southern Conferences stuck together as did the Central and Western. Things got to such a point that the Central and Western groups established new Eastern and Southern conferences. So in the course of the first six months of TURF's existence the major initiator and half the formal organization left, was bypassed, or was kicked out (depending on your interpretation of events). Every one became suspicious of everyone else. Money that was supposed to go from locals to conferences to national either got lost or was sat on by groups fearful of its getting lost. The national newspaper only came out sporadically.

To the general Teamster rank and file, TURF must appear as a rather confusing and chaotic group. Most Teamsters don't know of all this behind the scenes wrangling, but what they do see is a group whose energies are so taken up with internal hassles that it can hardly present a coherent or aggressive front to those it would most like to influence.

This confusion is accentuated by the lack of a clear organizing program. Just after Toledo the Cleveland chapter put out a leaflet which listed TURF's program as: 1) vested pension rights 2) constitutional reforms to make the international and locals more responsive to the rank and file 3) repeal of DOT regulations 4) right of petition and X referendum on a democratic basis 5) direct rank and file vote on international officers 6) union compliance with the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act 7) reestablishment in the pride and dignity of being a Teamster and 8) ridding all levels of Teamster leadership of criminal elements.

But this program was never voted on by anyone, never officially, ~~never~~ adopted, and certainly it never formed the basis of the local's activities. In February, 1972, at an executive board meeting in Cleveland a much more elaborate, progressive program was voted on. However, due to the enormous hassles and in-fighting, this program was never widely distributed or used to build the organization. As far as we know, the only place it has been published was in Modern Times Vol. 1, No. 4.

This lack of a program has all but destroyed local organizing efforts. Without a national program or coherent focus of activity, each chapter does its own thing. In Cleveland, despite being one of the biggest and most important TURF chapters, the group really has little identity as part of a national rank and file movement. It has been a local Unity Committee for the past two years and most of the members still see it this way. In fact, its official title is Unity Committee Chapter 1 of TURF.

#### CLEVELAND TURF

Almost all the individuals in Cleveland are members of Local 407, a 6-7,000 member drivers local, and most TURF activity consists of holding its own meetings and going to 407 meetings to raise challenges from the floor. Not a very exciting prospect for people not in 407 and not a tremendous turn-on for those that are.

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The efforts of Modern Times in the TURF chapter has been towards breaking down this closed little sense of the group and urging a principled, public presence to ~~to~~ confront the union. Though only one of us has a Teamster card, all of us have gone to TURF meetings and have been accepted through the paper. People were introduced to TURF on the basis of being part of the group which put out Modern Times, and were welcomed. Non-teamsters can become associate members of TURF and some of us have. Only two of us regularly go to TURF meetings and participate at length in the workings of the chapter.

People listen to and like our ideas, but little is done about them. Most of the Cleveland TURF members have little organizational skill or sense of how to develop a dynamically functioning group. This led to their seeing the meeting itself as the main function of the group and they relied heavily on the formal trappings of organization--constitutions, by-laws, parliamentary procedure--to give a sense of solidity and reality to the group's existence. We felt that our sense of organizing was where we could contribute the most, and tried to move frustration and anger over the issues toward some kind of action program for the local group to undertake.

When unemployment among Teamsters became an item of concern, we urged that TURF take an active part in pushing the union to fight the cut-back. We urged that TURF go from barn to barn organizing a vote whereby men would elect that no one works overtime so laid-off men could drive. The idea was greeted enthusiastically. One such vote was taken. There was no follow through, no effort to really confront the union on its lack of activity, and no attempt made to make it clear that a group called TURF which had such and such a program was doing this in the interests of the rank and file.

Pensions have been a continuous hassle for Teamsters, and when some local congressmen came to town for pension hearings, TURF members went. After the session, they wanted to do something more. It was decided that people be urged to write their congressmen. There is a really strong feeling among TURF members in Cleveland anyway that the government is your friend. This has been reinforced by Judge Green's decision, by the government's role in the Miner's union rank and file effort. The days spent fighting the National Guard in 1970 did not have a "radicalizing effect" on the Cleveland Teamsters in that they do not see themselves as fighting the government, but rather as fighting the government for the union member.

We urged that if a letter writing campaign was wanted, O.K., but why not hold a ~~an~~ public meeting for all union members under TURF sponsorship and hold a public forum on the pension mess. Create some PUBLIC MOTION around the issue. Everyone loved the idea. The motion passed. Nothing has been done to implement it.

The most significant example of TURF inertia, however, came over an effort to hold a Fitzsimmons-off-the-Pay-Board demo in front of Joint Council Headquarters here. There is one TURF member who is in the C.P. though nobody knows that but us. Just after the four labor members quit the Pay Board, this person moved to hold a demo to get Fitz off. The response was immediate and favorable. People loved the idea immediately. Within 15 minutes all tasks for the demo were

assigned. Had this come off, it really could have broken open the Teamsters for TURF in Cleveland.

Unfortunately the C.P. member had spent most of his time in TURF trying to get TURF leaders to relate to TUAD. The week-end the motion for the demo was passed, three local TURF people were in Cincinnati at a TUAD meeting. They had gone to meet other rank and filers. During the meeting a Frenchman from the CGT spoke and gave what probably was a standard French trade union speech.. He talked about working class action and the struggle against imperialism. The three TURF people just were not ready for this and came back feeling they had been in Moscow.

But their reaction was not simply a mindless anti-communism. They mentioned that they had repeatedly asked the head of TUAD if the group favored nationalization of industry. They were pissed because of his evasive replies, but when they nailed him down, he said, "Yes," Their reaction to that was interesting. They felt nationalization would lead to an abrogation of trade union rights. They would be public employees and public employees can't strike. If the government controlled pay board was bad, a government boss would be worse. They couldn't conceive of a boss who was really on their side, and they probably aren't wrong. We mentioned that rather than government running industry, the workers themselves could, but in no case should the bosses be allowed to run the show. They were taken aback by the idea. Obviously, it had never occurred to them or been mentioned as a real possibility. Certainly, their sense of socialism or communism did not include that possibility.

The next day one of the local papers had an article, which we were only to see about a month later, about NAM entitled, "Radical Left Changes Tactics." Modern Times was mentioned as a paper some NAM people worked on. The article wasn't that bad, but the headline was all people saw. When the reporter had asked us about an article, we told him we didn't want to have one and refused to talk to him, but he just used our name because he wanted to.

The combination of these two events freaked TURF people out a bit. They had an emergency meeting and called off the demo. Needless to say, we were never called to the meeting. Afterwards, when we found out about the article, we confronted the TURF people with their unwillingness to face us.

We have made no bones about being socialist or radical and have freely distributed our paper through TURF. We said that if they wanted to know what Modern Times was about, all they had to do was ask. We used their cowardice to back them down on the issue. We have not been red-baited since, but their fear of the left wiped out not only the demo, but the energy that had gathered behind it. We hadn't forced anything on TURF. Once the suggestion was made, they took up the idea with enthusiasm. But they failed to see that because of their uptightness about the left. TURF has yet to take a public organizational action in Cleveland.

One of our better experiences in TURF was their response to a woman from the Farmworkers. They understood in a very perceptive and gut kind of way what the struggle was about, understood immediately the negative role played by the Teamsters, and responded overwhelmingly with money and letters to the UFWU appeal. The elements of a class wide sense of solidarity present at that meeting was beautiful, but unfortunately it has never become fully a part of TURF consciousness and activities.

So weak has the group become that although most of the TURF leadership are running for office in the Local 407 elections, they refused to run on a slate, use TURF's name, or push a TURF program. Some have even chosen to run on the union slate and their choice is defended by the others. This helter-skelter effort to win union office constituted the present sole activity within TURF these days.

Elections to a local the size of 407 is no small potatoes. The campaign has been underway since the spring and elections aren't until December. Everyone is running and it seems that every one is running for himself, TURF be damned. The meetings attract less and less people income dwindles, interest is dissipating. If most of the TURF people win office, our guess is that TURF in Cleveland will disappear for the time being. If most of them lose, there won't be much of TURF left and a re-building effort will be needed.

Nationally, TURF is to meet in Los Angeles the week-end of October 21-22, 1972, for a constitutional convention. It is unclear who will be going to that meeting or what it will produce. TURF may have no national existence after that date, or it may pull something together. It looks like a toss-up.

We have tried to be consistent and principled in our relation with TURF. We have been sorely limited by the fact that none of us are active drivers in 407. This did not cause us to be taken less seriously by TURF, but did mean that we were out of touch with the day to day sense of the issues and were limited in our contacts. There is no doubt that probably a lot of good people who could have been a boon to TURF never came. Indeed, perhaps the cynicism which led them to see TURF as the same old bullshit might have been connected to a more radical sense of what should be done, however inarticulate. Their presence in TURF might have pushed the organization in healthy directions. As active members of 407 we could have been in some kind of contact with these people/

The only way we could have had a dramatic effect on TURF was to recruit more militant, dynamic Teamsters to it, especially those from other locals and trades. This would have functionally changed the nature of the local group and made our ideas more real to the present TURF membership. Because none of us was actively working a Teamster job, our only way to influence the organization was to urge them to adopt some some plan of action and then work with them on it. This had its limitation, and perhaps constitutes the most limiting factor in trying to assess our experiences.

We have met some good people through TURF and that has been important. These are younger guys for the most part, most of whom work at UPS. It is possible that they may be getting into some things where they work which we might be able to cooperate with outside the TURF structure.

There were some historical and structural problems with TURF that may have doomed the organization from the first. That is always hard to say. But from our experience with the Cleveland TURF chapter, the most limiting factor to TURF's effectiveness was the fear of being seen as anti-union or dual-unionist. TURF people we met desperately want to become good Teamsters. They are against the IBT bureaucrat because they have sullied the name and purpose of the union, but they have no analysis of how the union got that way. To them is a case of a few rotten apples. They see their job as "cleaning house" (from a Cleveland TURF leaflet) of the IBT, but they never question the structural soundness of the building or its principles of construction.

The ambiguity of their stand trips them up at every turn. They fight the union tooth and nail, yet honor it and want to preserve it. At one level this is very reasonable and understandable. In fact a lot of the initial motivation to "become a good Teamster" is a healthy desire to see one's work as respectable and dignified, worthy of one's effort and a source of pride. Since the job is controlled by others (the owners) and there is very little in the work itself that can give one self-esteem, then the sense of the trade is all important. The union insures that sense of the worth and dignity of the craft, or should. The healthy side of the effort to clean up the union and be proud of it is very much part of a desire to salvage some sense of worth from one's work.

Yet at another level this somewhat healthy desire becomes quite conflicted. No matter what programs and activities get voted on or what kind of enthusiasm greets them, when the time comes for action and it is seen that the union is clearly being opposed (as distinct from certain nasty individual leaders of the union) a braking effect sets in and everyone gets cold feet underneath all their hot rhetoric.

For socialists who seek a more thoroughgoing restructuring of power and social relationships, it may be that the most militant, active and aroused members of this kind of better-the-union movement may be incapable or unwilling to grasp the substance of those concerns, and may feel threatened in fact by the very thing you will need to create-- independent, democratic, working class power.

Many such militants feel--whatever their rhetoric--that the power is in the union, not the members, and they hate, fear, and love that power. They begin to feel that the only way to change things is to "throw the rascals out" and put good men in office because the power is "in the office" and it simply must be re-directed. They begin to lose confidence in the power of the rank and file or if they feel the rank and file getting stronger, they seek to harness it to the old union power. Breaking this consciousness and creating a real belief in the power of working class actions is the really crucial struggle.

Summary

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1) TURF as a national organization is limited by its racism, chauvanism, and driver orientation, but these, in fact were not at the heart of TURF's problems. They would have emerged more centrally as the organization got going, but TURF crippled itself by internal hassles and backbiting. Teamster rank and file activity will go on, but is unclear whether or not this particular group will survive.

2) There is definitely a role for people like ourselves to play in these organizations and that role focuses around our skill and ability to develop programs and actions which help the group achieve a sense of class consciousness. To be really effective in this task it is necessary to be working a job which brings you into daily contact with the union rank and file.

3) The major obstacle to communicating our sense of socialism is the ambivalent consciousness most rank and file caucuses have about their union.

XMODERN TIMES  
CLEVELAND, OHIO

\*The conference originally scheduled to take place October 2]-22, ]972, has been rescheduled to take place sometime in January.