

Theory/Practice

**NEWS & LETTERS***"Human power is its own end" - Karl Marx*[www.newsandletters.org](http://www.newsandletters.org)**NEWS & LETTERS, August-September 2001**[Home](#)[News & Letters  
Newspaper](#)[Back Issues](#)[News & Letters  
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Dunayevskaya](#)[Events](#)[Literature](#)[Contact Us](#)[Search  
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donation](#)**Reformers crash Hoffa's party**

Las Vegas-Reformers in Teamsters Local 743 in Chicago went to the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Convention in June to demand democracy, fair representation and accountability from Teamster President James R. Hoffa. The 743 New Leadership Slate had won 11 out of 20 delegate seats and 13 out of 20 alternate seats. They joined reformers from locals around the country and challenged Hoffa's broken promises to root out corruption, increase strike benefits, and revive organizing.

The IBT Convention returned to Las Vegas just as new accusations of corruption broke in the media. The Independent Review Board has filed internal union charges that a former top Hoffa aide and a Chicago Teamster leader, William T. Hogan, set up a sweetheart deal to hire non-union labor for Las Vegas convention work.

The convention was chaired mainly by Hoffa. But the procedures were less than democratic: The agenda was changed daily without discussion, and rules on speaking to the issues were established one day, then reversed the next.

The reform delegates nominated Tom Leedham, a former UPS worker and current local president in Oregon, to run against Hoffa for IBT president this fall. Pro-Hoffa delegates would stack all mikes to block reform delegates from speaking. Candidate Leedham challenged Hoffa to make good on his promise to revitalize the strike fund without a dues increase and was shouted down and pushed from the mike by a bullying Hoffa supporter.

Against overwhelming odds of about 15 to 1, the reformers spoke on important issues.

Resolutions and constitutional amendments addressing fair elections, excessive officer salaries, and unfair contract votes were voted down by a "Thumbs Up/Thumbs Down" signal from Hoffa floor leaders. A Rank and File Bill of Rights guaranteeing the right of members to elect their stewards and to review contract changes in writing before voting on them was voted down.

In a final blow, all references to the Ethical Practices Committee were struck from the constitution. Hoffa cronies even suggested that Leedham drop out of the race to save the union the expense of an election. So much for democracy! Voting on slate nominations was hampered one evening by Hoffa delegates who blocked the hallway to the voting room and harassed Leedham supporters.

On the opening day, 250 Leedham supporters rallied outside Bally's Hotel and marched through the casino to the convention hall chanting "Rank and File Teamster Power." Daily demonstrations and street theater lampooning Hoffa promises and scandals caught everyone's attention. In the end, the Hoffa

delegates would still follow the leader and the thumbs down signal to defeat progressive proposals. But labor voices were heard by the more than 2,000 people present-and workers everywhere are stronger for it.

The Teamsters union remains full of inequities, with minority members frequently getting substandard contracts with few benefits. Local 743 is a diverse union, with workers among the lowest paid of Teamster members. Black, white and Latino members work in universities, hospitals, manufacturing and health care. Many of them suddenly found themselves without insurance when the \$16-million 743 Health & Welfare Fund went bankrupt. In elections this fall the New Leadership Slate hopes to oust the do-nothing old guard and elect leaders who will fight for better contracts.

-Sharon M.

[Return to top](#)

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