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Teamster Magazine

December 2001

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Teamsters Mourn Passing of Weldon Mathis

October 20, 2001

Weldon Lamar Mathis, a lifelong Teamster and the union's General Secretary-Treasurer from 1985 until his retirement in 1991, passed away October 20, 2001, in Ormond Beach, Florida, after a long bout of cancer. He was 75.

"Weldon Mathis dedicated his life to ensuring that the members of our union receive strong representation," said James P. Hoffa, Teamsters General President. "He knew that the real job of a union leader is to defend members' interests against any and all who would challenge their rights, diminish their dignity or steal the fruits of their labor. He will be greatly missed."

A trade unionist all of his adult life, Mathis joined Local 728 in Atlanta as a business agent in 1950. He was elected Secretary-Treasurer in 1953 and, in 1966, President, an office held for 20 years. He was an organizer with the union's Southern Conference from 1957 to 1967, when he was named a general organizer for the International Union.

Mathis was appointed an International Vice President in 1972, a post to which he was reelected unanimously by delegates to the 1976 and 1981 Conventions. He served as Director of the Building Material and Construction Department from 1978 to 1987, and from 1967 to 1978 as Executive Assistant to former General President Frank Fitzsimmons.

Mathis is survived by Myrtle--his wife of 58 years--five children and 12 grandchildren.

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Tankhaul Director Testifies at Senate Subcommittee Hearing

Most Tank Drivers Underpaid, Overworked Which Hurts Security, Keith Gleason Says

International Brotherhood of Teamsters Tankhaul Director Keith Gleason urged U.S. Senators to take steps to boost the pay and training of tank drivers to improve safety and security in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Union drivers are better paid and the companies they work for do a good job screening drivers to make sure they have the proper license and endorsement. But deregulation of the industry has increased the number of drivers working for owner-operators, who often are underpaid and are not properly screened. That hurts security on our nation's highways.

"Of the approximately 100,000 tank drivers operating on our nation's highways today, the vast majority are underpaid and overworked," Gleason told members of the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Surface Transportation and Merchant Marine. "As a result, these drivers do not have the time for their proper rest, let alone the time for the necessary safety precautions that must be taken in the transportation and delivery of the products they haul."

In addition to pursuing more safety measures, Gleason urged the Senators to pursue regulatory measures.

"That will ensure that our nation's drivers are more highly compensated, experienced and trained in all aspects, including safety and security," Gleason said.

Tank drivers transport very hazardous cargo.

"It accounts for only about five percent of cargo transport in the U.S., but the loads of chemicals, explosives, petroleum products, liquefied gases and poisons are some of the most dangerous and volatile on our nation's highways," Gleason told Senators.

Gleason also urged increased training in order for drivers to obtain hazardous-materials transport permits, and increased security at terminals and holding lots.

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Orange County Bus Drivers Win

Two-Tiered Wage System Eliminated

On August 21, more than 1,100 coach operators won a three-year contract with the Orange County Transportation Authority. The bus drivers, members of Local 952, won a 12.5 percent wage increase and elimination of most of the givebacks that were made in 1996 after the county filed for bankruptcy.

"There was a lot of anger over the bankruptcy," said Patrick Kelly, Local 952's Secretary-Treasurer. "We were able to knock off most of the concessions and get a generous package."

In addition to the pay increase, workers rid themselves of a two-tiered wage system and won compensation for travel time and wages retroactive to May 1. Junior drivers received improvements in benefits including sick days, holidays and vacation time. Senior drivers--those that were employed during the county's bankruptcy--will receive \$1,800 bonuses.

"The elimination of the two-tiered wage system was a significant issue," said Kelly. "By doing so, we were able to unify this group."

The Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) was involved in the bargaining and more than 60 negotiating sessions were required to get the agreement in place. The contract was approved by a vote of 584-246.

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Teamsters Help Mexican VW Workers Win Contract

Delaware Local Celebrates Strikers' Victory

Local 326 Teamsters celebrated the hard-fought victory of Volkswagen workers in Puebla, Mexico, whose 18-day strike ended in early September with a 14 percent pay increase that put their wages in line with those of other major Mexican automakers.

Nearly 200 Delaware Teamsters, who work on new Volkswagen cars at the Port of Wilmington, signed appeals for justice to Berna Leissner, director general of Volkswagen Puebla, and wore solidarity stickers to show their support of the Puebla workers' union -- Sindicato Independiente de Volkswagen.

James P. Hoffa, General President, commended the Teamsters for their dedication to their fellow union members' cause -- and the strikers for their significant victory.

"Teamsters have always and will continue to support workers who pursue their rights to dignity and respect on the job," Hoffa said. "Congratulations to the Puebla workers who fought hard to be treated fairly -- and won."

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Sooper-Sized Win for Denver Teamsters

Locals 435 and 537 Battle With King Soopers Ends

For Teamsters at Denver's King Soopers distribution center, the fight to protect their jobs required a new approach -- something the company wouldn't expect.

King Soopers and its parent company Kroger had backed away from a five-year contract with the Teamsters, taking away nearly half the drivers' stores -- a direct threat to the workers' livelihoods.

And King Soopers officials were bent on dividing warehouse workers from drivers.

But Ron Wittman, a 23-year-driver from Local 537, his co-workers and local union leaders stood firm -- employing a unique arsenal of strategies to thwart the company's exploits.

"We sent them a very strong message," Wittman said. "We're not going to sit here and we're not going to take it."

Working the Neighborhoods

First, said Steve Vairma, Local 435 Secretary-Treasurer, and Ed Modecker, Local 537 Secretary-Treasurer, both locals formed a firm alliance:

"We were both in it together," Modecker said. "We said we'd fight together for everything."

Shortly after the company's spring announcement that it would pull 38 of 88 accounts from Teamsters drivers, employed by Kroger's third-party operator Compass Logistics, the locals filed National Labor Relations Board charges -- and won a decision from the board that ordered the contract be vacated.

But as the legal wheels were turning, workers went into King Soopers territory -- taking their message directly to customers through announcements hung on doors of homes in neighborhoods surrounding King Soopers stores.

They collected signed promises of support from 10,000 customers. They advertised in community newspapers and spread the word of Kroger's broken promises word of mouth.

"We hit them in their territory," Vairma said. "We showed them that we were willing to go the extra mile to protect good union jobs -- and that we'd choose the mile that was in their neighborhood."

Ties that Bind

Back in the workplace, warehouse workers and drivers wore stickers to show solidarity, convincing some warehouse managers to wear them as well. Signs appeared outside the facility alerting scab drivers hired by Compass that they were in Teamster territory.

Using an internal communications network, the workers disseminated news from local union leaders to their peers.

"At first there was an attitude that there wasn't anything we could do, but after it was demonstrated that we had support, they started thinking there was something we could do," said Al Marcus, a Local 435 driver and eight-year King Soopers employee. "They practically organized themselves."

Happy Ending

On the Friday before Labor Day, workers from both locals approved a new agreement that:

- Guarantees that the 38 accounts, pulled from Teamsters drivers and given to a non-union firm, will be returned to the bargaining unit;
- Promises no layoffs due to subcontracting during the life of the four-year agreement;
- Guarantees that all warehouse jobs will fall under the Teamsters agreement with Compass Logistics -- no matter where the facility moves; and
- Will create another 125 Teamster jobs.

"The company wanted the warehouse workers to sell out the drivers," said Jerry Mathews, a 20-year Teamster from Local 537, "but the warehouse workers made it known they are Teamsters and they stand together."

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A Survey of UPS Bargaining Issues Undergo Close Scrutiny

With the 2002 contract campaign at United Parcel Service underway, Teamsters officials are reviewing the thousands of bargaining surveys returned by UPS workers.

"The responses pouring in show that our members care deeply

about their jobs and about their union,” said Bill Lichtenwald, director of the Teamsters Parcel and Small Package Division and Co-Chairman of the UPS National Negotiating Committee. “They want to share in the success they helped create.”

The 2001 UPS Bargaining Survey, which was mailed in August to all 200,000 Teamsters who work at UPS, is a key element of the union’s determination to guarantee that the contract campaign is a grassroots effort that fully reflects the priorities of the brothers and sisters who don a brown uniform every day.

“We’re building a member-driven contract campaign,” said James P. Hoffa, General President and Co-Chairman of the UPS National Negotiating Committee. “We are taking the time to mobilize our members, consolidate our strength and devise a game plan that will ensure victory. The surveys are part of our effort to ensure that the needs of the membership are addressed at the bargaining table.”

In addition, the survey questioned members about working conditions, health and safety issues and ways to better meet the needs of part-time workers.

The result was a wealth of data that provides a solid basis for formulating the campaign’s strategy. Negotiators will use the results to shape their bargaining approaches and strategies so that they reflect the priorities of the rank-and-file.

Many of the returned surveys indicated that wage increases and improved pensions are among members’ top economic priorities. Teamsters are frustrated by the growing gap between wages and corporate profits.

“Last year, UPS walked away with more than \$2.8 billion in profits,” said Lichtenwald. “Our members created that wealth. Today, we are demanding that our members share in that wealth.”

Doing Whatever It Takes

Supplementing the surveys are the membership proposal meetings and steward training seminars that have helped members to focus on the workplace improvements they want to achieve. They also provide invaluable forums for sharing these views with union officers, both at the local and International levels. Across the country, members are being educated and mobilized for the struggle ahead.

The 2002 contract campaign at United Parcel Service is the Teamsters Union’s number one bargaining priority. Although management has intimated that it would prefer an extension of the current contract, the union’s response has been a resounding “No!”

“We will do whatever it takes to win a strong contract,” Hoffa said. “We will not bend to the whims of management.”

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