

Communications

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Teamster Magazine

March 2001

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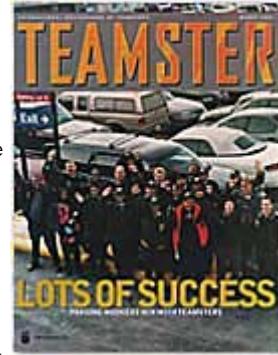
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Lots of Success

Parking Workers Give Teamsters High Rates

You're late for a business meeting. You're joining your spouse for lunch. Or you just want to see the sights.

With parking an ever-diminishing commodity in America's cities, most folks don't think twice before they hand over their car keys to a parking garage attendant. Yet behind that smiling face is a \$26 billion industry that was built on the backs of often low-paid, exploited labor.

"The guys that don't have the union don't have the benefits, security or recourse," said Richard Plymire of Local 117, a parking worker for 27 years who works at the lot at the Camlin Hotel in downtown Seattle.

That isn't right—and that's where the Teamsters have made their mark.

"We've come a long way thanks to the union," Plymire said. "We got rid of the two-tiered pay scale, secured sick days where there were none and forced management to be specific on issues that were vague. We've made a lot of advances."



Finding Space for a Union

Historically, parking workers have been difficult to organize. Isolated in small shops at diverse locations, their ranks diluted by the high turnover that low wages and harsh working conditions engender. This is a multiracial, multiethnic, multilingual workforce that as much as any other needs strong representation.

Today, there are new challenges to organizing garages.

"Fifteen years ago, they were mostly smaller, mom-and-pop operations," said John Coli, Secretary-Treasurer of Local 727 in Chicago. "Now, the industry is dominated by huge multinational corporations."

Yet for all the impediments, organizers are rewarded daily by the changes they make in people's lives.

"If it weren't for the union, we wouldn't be here," said Bobby Lugo, a 40-year Local 272 Teamster who works at Central Parking's Galleria Garage on E. 58 Street in New York City. "We'd be working 50 hours a week, seven days a week for nothing, and they could get rid of you any time they want. With a union behind me, they treat me like a human being."

A Helping Hand

Local unions get a big boost from the new National Parking Council, a component of the Industrial Trades Division created by the Hoffa Administration to support organizing, resolve problems and improve conditions for the parking membership.

During the past decade, large corporations have consolidated the parking industry, with five parking companies now controlling approximately 75 percent of the industry.

"One purpose of the Council is to band together, as the parking firms have done, in order to effectively represent our members," said Coli, who serves as Council Chairman. Coli pointed to a number of initiatives the Council has undertaken to empower workers:

Research—Indexing all of the contracts by content, provisions and companies; providing the materials and leverage needed to negotiate better contracts.

Organizing—Identifying cities where opportunities exist; contacting individual locals; working with organized operators for first contracts.

Newsletter—Supported with voluntary funds from local unions belonging to the Council.

The Council's presence forces big corporations to recognize that a failure to negotiate local contracts can have repercussions on a national level. Picket lines can be and are extended.

With the Council's information bank, local unions can access past contracts that have been successfully negotiated throughout the country. Unions now have the ability to research victories in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, where the parking membership is strong.

And with copies of every contract indexed by articles and sections, "this will lead to contracts being similar throughout the country, so that everybody gets the help they need," Coli said.

One Space Back, Two Spaces Forward

The road to success is not always easy. Members of Local 272 in New York City worked from 1989 to 1998 without a contract.

"We went through a lot of hard times in those years," said Tim McCray, a 34-year Teamster at Meyers' New Times Square Garage on W. 44 Street. "But the guys that are there now have our interests in mind. These guys have been standing with us. And the owners have been doing everything right since the last contract."

"I feel like I have somebody else working for me, someone letting me know what are my rights," added Eneida Diaz, a cashier at the Quik Park facility at Broadway's Gershwin Theater. "I feel more secure. If I get fired, I know where to go and who to talk to."

"In our local, garage attendants can make a decent living," said Eddie Allers, Secretary-Treasurer of Local 272. "When you hear the gripes, it's good, because then we can do better."

Strength Through Unity

The unity that marks today's Teamsters has strengthened the hands of those involved in organizing and negotiating with today's parking conglomerates.

A new agreement signed with industry giant Central Parking System in December narrowly averted a strike in San Francisco and was the final piece of a Master Collective Bargaining Agreement that brought more than 95 percent of the city's parking workers under one umbrella.

"We listened, Central listened, and I think both sides better understand where each is coming from," said Ernie Yates, Secretary-Treasurer of Local 665. "I think this experience shows that if both parties sit down and discuss issues in good faith, resolution can be found."

Giving workers a voice when they face off with management is what the union is all about. In the nation's parking lots and garages, it means the difference between exploitation and dignity.

"The union's the best thing that ever happened to me," said Zeb Barnes, a parking member of Local 727 in Chicago since 1954. "With the union, the owners don't push you around, and you have benefits and opportunities for a better life."

"I've been here a long time, and have had to work my way up over the years," Barnes said. "I can tell you, it's nice to have somebody in your corner."

Organizing: No Daily Maximum

Teamster magazine recently discussed the challenges of organizing the parking industry with Michael Beranbaum, a Business Representative with Local 117 in Seattle.

Question: How is the Parking industry changing?

Answer: In many cases, smaller regional companies are being purchased by larger national companies.

Q: How are the Teamsters addressing these changes?

A: The International has set up a caucus within the Industrial Trades Division specifically for people in the parking industry. It allows local unions to network easily with other local unions around the country that share similar employers. We are able to easily reach out to people from other local unions with long histories with certain employers in order to apply additional pressures upon them during both organizing drives and contract campaigns.

Q: Does consolidation within the industry help or hurt organizing?

A: I believe it can help in organizing. We are able to put additional pressure on employers by involving their employees from other parts of the country in organizing efforts. In some cases, this may be through petitions of support. In other cases, we can spread information on how the employer is treating employees attempting to organize in

our area to their employees in other parts of the country.

Q: How does the diversity of parking workers challenge organizing the industry?

A: In some cases, it creates the challenges of language and cultural barriers, but these challenges lend nicely to the need to involve members from the same industry in these campaigns to help bridge these barriers.

Q: Why do parking employees need a union?

A: For the same reasons any employee needs a union. Workers in this industry deserve the same level of dignity and respect on the job that every other working person in America deserves. They also have a right to make a living wage and receive medical and pension benefits.

A Better Working Environment

Local 272's Bobby Lugo knows that like every other industry, parking has its share of occupational hazards. Once, armed robbers shot one of his co-workers in both legs during a stick-up. On another occasion, thieves stuffed an attendant in the trunk of a car, leaving him gasping for air.

But the more common danger for parking workers is environmental. Whether on an outside lot or in an enclosed garage, they are exposed daily to potentially toxic levels of carbon monoxide, a colorless, odorless, tasteless gas that can create headaches, tightness across the chest, nausea, drowsiness, inattention and fatigue.

"Sometimes you get sick, nauseous, even pass out," Lugo said. "If the ventilation isn't working, it can get like an oven down in the garage."

"It was so hot last summer, I almost passed out," attendant David Mason said about Central Parking's Symphony Garage on W. 56 Street in New York. "But the union took care of the situation, and the company had to put in fans."

"If there are problems with the fans or the exhaust, we go straight to the company," said James Mullin of Local 272. "They must take care of it right away. We also notify the Occupational Safety and Health Administration."

The Teamsters union is working to eliminate these kinds of hazards. "We are developing model contract language to provide sufficient ventilation in the workplace for our parking members," said LaMont Byrd, the Teamster's Safety and Health Director.

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The Big Payback

First of Five Detroit Area Beer

Distributors Settle With Local 1038

In a struggle for justice that took 10 years, members of Detroit Local 1038 have finally tasted the fruits of their labor. After a lengthy hearing that saw the employers appeal all the way to the Supreme Court, five beer wholesalers—Eastown, Oak, Powers, Hubert and Don Lee—were found guilty by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) of unlawful conduct toward Local 1038. The union endured eight years without a contract as more than 1,000 members were denied seniority and forced to work longer hours after the companies conspired to bargain in bad faith.

"What these companies did devastated the lives of their employees. It was shameful," said Greg Nowak, Local 1038 President. "It might have taken awhile, but we're finally beginning to see some justice."

Show Us the Money

On December 29, Eastown Distributors began issuing checks to more than 230 Teamster members. The total backpay award from the company totals \$6.8 million with individual members receiving settlements for as much as \$290,000.

"These companies tried every trick in the book to avoid bargaining an honest contract, but we fought them and won," said Bill Whitfield, a shop steward and warehouse worker. "It's good to have a union that will fight for you."

Smoking Gun

In 1990, the companies hired an anti-union consultant, West Coast Industrial Relations Assn., to discuss alternative ways of bargaining together to increase their bargaining power relative to the union. The principal question involved in the dispute was whether the pact created an unlawful multi-employer bargaining relationship among the distributors. A paper trail uncovered during the proceedings provided the evidence Local 1038 needed.

Union lawyers uncovered a document that stated if one of the companies negotiated directly with the union; such a distributor would have to pay a \$400,000 penalty to each of the other companies. Perhaps most tellingly, no distributor ever offered a contract proposal different from that offered by every other distributor.

"They tried to use smoke and mirrors, but we saw through it," said Tom Lewis, a driver for Eastown. "Now, they have to pay for what they did."

After the appeals were over, Local 1038 signed separate contracts with all of the distributors reinstating previous union-friendly provisions including substantial increases in wages. Financial settlements with the other four distributors are sure to follow.

"We have our contracts and the first of our settlements," said Nowak. "Hopefully this will send a message to employers that it pays to abide by the law."

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Local 916 Signs Agreement For Wal-Mart SuperCenter

Springfield's Building Trades Organization, Teamsters Secure All Union Project

When Wal-Mart decided to build two new SuperCenters in Springfield, Illinois, some local residents cried foul.

Folks living at the upscale Panther Creek subdivision didn't like the idea of a big commercial project disrupting life at their exclusive development. And with their influence, they were going to make it tough on Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart, in turn, enlisted the help of Local 916 and President Tony Barr to lobby the city council and other community interests on their behalf. For the assistance, Barr was assured the two projects would be 100 percent union-run. After Wal-Mart got the go-ahead to build, they started hedging on the deal.

Sticking Together

"We had to send Wal-Mart a message that they had to live up to their end of the agreement," said Barr. "It was all or nothing."

With the help of the local Building Trades Organization and the threat of a walk-out, solidarity between the trades was sufficient enough to secure a project labor agreement between Lippold & Arnett Trucking and Local 916 to assure an all union project. The agreement will add 15-20 new Teamsters to Local 916's roster. More importantly, the agreement opens the door for organizing more drivers and has helped establish good working relationships between the local trades and the Teamsters.

"This is a major win for Local 916 and the Central Illinois building trades," said Barr. "The building trades deserve a lot of credit for sticking together and helping to ensure that Wal-Mart will live up to its promise of a 100 percent union-built facility."

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Sears Warehouse Goes Union

Teamsters Organize Retail Giant

Sears was raking in the bucks while paying its warehouse workers peanuts. "And they're endangering our lives, to boot," said Douglas Howe, who fills orders at the giant Sears Logistics Center in Wilkes-Barre, PA. "Since they moved this facility from Philadelphia seven years ago they've made a ton of promises, but all we've got to show for it is crummy wages and work rules that practically guarantee injuries."

In one two-week stretch, union activists tallied 10 serious injuries. The most telling point of that statistic was how ordinary Sears' horrific record had become.



Key Facility

Sears' Wilkes-Barre Logistics Center services the entire East Coast. It processes close to 25 percent of Sears total U.S. merchandise. Its workers generate an enormous profit margin. Sears was determined to deny the 675 hard-working men and women at this key facility their fair share.

When Teamster Local 401 filed the cards to demand an election, Sears' union-busting commenced in full. The corporate giant brought in its own biased "human resources" people and augmented their number with a gaggle of notorious anti-union consultants.

But the warehouse workers had seen this drill before. In 1993, Sears beat back a first Teamster organizing effort. After that came attempts by the Operating Engineers, the UFCW and the Steelworkers.

"All their bullying eventually worked in our favor," said George Vitanovec, Local 401 President. "We've been trying to organize this shop since 1993. Time after time managers made threats, told lies and failed to follow through on promises. We just stayed in there working with the employees."

Perseverance Rewarded

The hard work of Sears' workers like Howe and his colleagues Bert Parker and Jim Thiemann, along with the resources committed by Local 401 won the day. Along with Vitanovec, Principal Officer Joseph Gorham especially credits Trustee James Murphy and volunteer organizer Simon Daywood.

The vote was an overwhelming 318-267. Sears had finally met its match in the

combination of union solidarity and a core of enthusiastic employees who refused to be denied.

"Sears just wouldn't treat us with respect," said Theimann. "In one meeting they told me, if you don't like it here, there's the door. This is coal country; they knew jobs can be scarce. Well, the other thing about coal country is that I'm a third generation union man. My daddy and granddad were both coal miners. And I'm not the only one. I wasn't going to take it any more and neither were my co-workers. We won the vote and now we're damn proud to be Teamsters."

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Beer Strike

Rehire My Brother, NOW

Robert Hearns and his co-workers voted 30-1 to join the Teamsters. Less than three hours later the boss fired him. "It was just plain spite," said James Kates, Hearns' shop steward at Quality Beer Service of Fairfield, NJ. "The owner was mad he lost the election, so he told the warehouse manager to fire Robert. We couldn't stand for that. The vote to strike was unanimous."



A Strong Group of Teamsters

The 37-member bargaining unit vowed they weren't coming back in until their brother was back on his forklift. On the job, the Teamster drivers and warehousemen at Quality pride themselves on their teamwork. They approached their unfair labor practice strike with the same attitude.

"This turns out to be a very strong group of Teamsters," said Ernie Soehl, the Local 701 Vice President and International Representative who worked with them. "Everyone was out on that picket line or doing ambulatory picketing. The company tried to use scab drivers, but they never got more than 25 percent of their deliveries made."

Good drivers develop strong relationships along their routes. Quality Beer customers refused deliveries from scab drivers.

"My customers were mad, they were hurting," said Kates. "But they weren't mad at me. They don't like union-busting or scabs any better than we do."

Standing Together

Hearns' co-workers understood that if the boss could get away with this, none of them were safe.

"They put themselves in my place," said Hearns. "They really stood with me. I'll always appreciate that."

Their solidarity paid off in less than a week. On the third day of the strike, Quality Beer's owner called Soehl and reversed Hearns' firing. Soehl called Kates on the picket line.

"Ernie told me Robert had his job back," said Kates. "But he said Quality wanted the drivers to come back in right away. Robert's regular shift didn't start until midnight."

The Quality Teamsters caucused one last time and produced one more unanimous vote.

"They said they weren't going back in until I did, and they meant it," said Hearns. "I reported back to work that night and the drivers came in the next morning. It sure felt good to be back at work together."

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Whole Lot of Rosie

Meridie Rosier believes that working people deserve a voice. And he will stop at nothing to make sure that voice is never silenced.

Rosier, or "Rosie" to friends, has been a shop steward at Seattle's Buffalo Industries for almost 30 years. Buffalo Industries is a rag manufacturing company. Mark and Larry Benezra are the fifth generation of their family to head the company. When they were little, "Rosie" trained the boys, showing them how to sort the rags and other textiles. Once they were grown, they did all they could to get rid of Rosier's union, Teamsters Local 117.

"I love them like sons," Rosier said of his bosses. "We have our falling outs, but it didn't affect our relationship."

No Sell Out

The Benezra brothers dropped the company's pension program, medical benefits and dues check-off in an effort to break the union. Rosie was determined not to let that happen.

"My feeling is, you can kick me out, but don't kick my union out," said Rosier. "I

wasn't going to sell my union out over my friendship with Mark and Larry."

Rosie took it upon himself to collect the monthly dues from his co-workers at three separate facilities. Adding to the difficulty of Rosier's task was the fact that the employees cutting and sorting the cloth on the factory floor represented 13 different nationalities. Rosie was able to communicate the union's message effectively enough to maintain the company's membership. Before turning the checks into the union office, he showed them to the owners to remind them of the support the union had.

"He was the glue that held that union together," said Randy Vticovich, Local 117 President. "There was no way he was going to let them take it away from him."

Rosie didn't stop there. He kept on the brothers to restore the workers' benefits and to bargain a new contract. Rosier logged over 100 hours on the phone with the owners trying to secure a deal. The brothers offered Rosie early retirement, anything to get him to drop his crusade. But Rosier's mind was set; he would keep on fighting.

"The owners didn't want the union in there," said Rosier. "But working people need insurance. I was determined to get it as long as I had breath left in me."

The Pay-Off

After a year and a half of negotiating, Rosie and the employees at Buffalo Industries finally got what they worked so hard to achieve—a new contract. Ratified on December 20, the contract restores the workers' health insurance, dues check-off, sick leave, a 401k program and increased holiday and vacation time. Rosier's persistence was too much for the owners to overcome.

"A union fights for the people," Rosier said. "Now we can retire with dignity and hold our heads high."

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