

'A slap in the face': Trump meeting sparks outrage in Teamsters union

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February 5, 2024



'Number 45 [Trump] is an arrogant, incompetent, narcissistic, lying, racist, insurrectionist, and a sexual offender who often displays ignorant, egotistical, union busting, discriminatory and bullying behavior.' -Letter from James (Curb) Curbeam, chair of the Teamster National Black Caucus. Above, Teamsters National Black Caucus (TNBC) convention. Photo: TNBC

By acting in the role of the old racist and sexist business-unionism leadership, Teamsters union President Sean O'Brien made a sharp break with the new progressive union movement — personally visiting Donald Trump in Mar-a-Lago, Florida, on Jan 26. Subsequently, O'Brien demanded the entire Teamsters General Executive Board meet with Trump at the union's headquarters in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 31

Forming a vocal opposition, John Palmer, a Teamsters International vice president from Texas, refused to attend the meeting with an “insurrectionist.” In an interview with Steve Zeltser on WorkWeek Radio, Palmer said: “There’s zero – nothing on issues that affect labor that Donald Trump supports nor has he ever supported. Trump basically spits in our faces.”

The Teamsters National Black Caucus said in a statement about O'Brien's meeting with Trump: Trump's “union-busting tactics, blatant disregard for government, and his bigotry are known ... as he has proudly touted his vile rhetoric to any listening audience.”

Chris Silvera, a leader of Teamsters Local 808 and former chair of the Teamsters Black Caucus, said: “We’re not dealing with the Republican Party anymore. People should be very clear about this. They are confederates, people who think there needs to be a Civil War. You’ve got a president of the Teamsters union who’s consorting and is actually helping give credibility to this person who’s calling for a dictatorship.”

Silvera explained: “O’Brien went to Mar-a-Lago, the place where people go to bow down there to ‘Kiss the Ring of Donald Trump.’ There’s something improper with our president making this trip to the headquarters of the confederacy.

“It is an affront to all those members who are not a party to this fascist movement. It sends a message to all the Black, Latin, Muslim, and women union members that you

really don't care about them.

"O'Brien's worrying about the racist elements within the union. Instead he should be trying to either convert those elements over to a newfound reality or to isolate them. To really believe that we had to play with them at this moment in history is troubling, to say the least."

Gained appearance of militant leader

During Teamsters union organizing campaigns at Amazon and contract negotiations such as that with UPS last July, Sean O'Brien gained the appearance of a militant labor leader, covering up an earlier image of a tough guy with shady connections.

The Teamsters UPS contract campaign, "while notable for its bloviating, looked hollow compared with the UAW 'Stand Up Strikes' against the former Big Three automakers," writes Joe Allen, author of "The Package King: A Rank and File History of United Parcel Service."

O'Brien comes from Teamsters Local 25 in Boston, which is reported to have a long history of racism. Silvera says there are no Black workers there. Strangely enough, Black workers sat on the Executive Board of Local 25 at the turn of the century. Silvera says, "Local 25 has fallen behind."

Last February, former Black and Latino workers for the Teamsters International Union initiated a legal suit accusing the union of racism after O'Brien became the union's president in March 2022. The lawsuit says that "rather than maintaining or increasing diversity, more than a dozen people of color were fired, setting back the Organizing Department's goals of effectively recruiting and organizing non-whites, in favor of bolstering the majority white membership."

It also claims that O'Brien "publicly humiliated" the plaintiffs in the case, calling them "bad apples" and "lazy."3

Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), the promoters of O'Brien, were once seen as rank-and-file reformers in the union. At its November convention, the TDU tabled a motion for a ceasefire in Gaza. The motion for a ceasefire had been put forward by Teamsters Mobilize (TM) members, a much smaller network of Teamsters activists. One member of TM was banned from the TDU convention for criticizing it. TM has campaigned for \$25 per hour starting pay for part-timers and for solidarity with Palestine.

'A slap in the face'

Richard Hooker Jr., the secretary-treasurer of Teamsters Local 623 and vice-president of the Philadelphia AFL-CIO Board, said: "As leaders, we have to do a better job of explaining to our members that a vote for Trump is a vote against your pension, a vote for Trump is a vote against organizing workers, a vote for Trump is another vote against the working class."

Jess Lister, a shop steward in Georgia and member of the Teamsters LGBTQ caucus, who has helped lead a campaign to organize part-time UPS workers, called the meeting "a slap in the face."

Lister added that she did not support Biden, but that she viewed the Trump meeting as especially galling given his record of stacking the courts with anti-union judges and overseeing a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) that issued rulings making it harder for workers to organize.

"He has a longstanding history of racism, of hate towards women, towards minorities, towards the LGBTQ community - he is not accepting of other people," Lister said. "Our union president shouldn't even entertain the idea of a meeting. That shouldn't have even been on the table."



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