

‘Upon this (foundering) rock’: Minneapolis Teamsters and the transformation of US business unionism, 1934–1941

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This article examines an understudied consequence of the labor upsurge of the 1930s – namely, the way in which the conflict between conservative business unionism and more radical alternatives of the period fundamentally transformed business unionism itself. The author illustrates this through a case study of the struggle within the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) between the business unionist leadership and an insurgent movement spearheaded by the Trotskyist leaders of Minneapolis Local 544. In order to defeat the insurgents, the IBT leadership violated their commitment to anti-statist voluntarism, using newly enacted labor policies to mobilize coercive state power in their favor. This episode foreshadowed expanded state intervention in union affairs in the post-war period and marked the ascendancy of a new model of industrial business unionism. The latter blended innovative tactics borrowed from radical challengers with the narrow economism and political conservatism of its craft business unionist forebears.

Introduction

Mr. Chairman, one of the greatest organizers the world ever produced since the beginning of Christianity was the lowly Nazarene, and He said to one of His people, ‘Upon this rock I will build My Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’

To us was given a charter – a charter from the American Federation of Labor, and Gompers, McGuire, Duncan, Foster, and the other men said: ‘Upon the rock of trades autonomy, craft trades, you shall build the church of the labor movement, and the gates of hell nor trade industrialism shall not prevail against it.’ (Daniel J. Tobin, General President, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, 15 October 1935)¹

When Daniel Tobin uttered the above words from the floor of the 1935 convention of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), he was defending the core tenets of the business unionism of his time – ‘the rock of trades autonomy, craft trades’ – against what he saw as a mortal threat. He feared that industrial unionism, involving organizing drives among millions of unskilled workers, would ‘destroy this organization that I have the honor to represent’.²

The industrial union upsurge of the 1930s did not destroy the Teamsters, nor did it destroy business unionism.³ However, it did fundamentally transform both, turning the rock upon which Tobin’s trade union tenets were built to sand within a

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few short years. Labor scholars have already studied in detail the erosion of the Teamsters' organizational commitment to 'craft trades', as the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) changed itself in this period from a small, decentralized craft union into a large, more centrally coordinated industrial transportation union. What remains largely overlooked, however, is the shifting nature of Tobin's and the Teamsters' political commitment to 'trades autonomy', their opposition to coercive state intervention in union affairs.

This article recounts the story of how and why this shift in labor-state relations happened in the Teamsters through an analysis of a critical episode in the union's history: the defeat of a radical insurgent movement within the IBT, headed by the Trotskyist-led Minneapolis Local 574/544.⁴ In the 1930s the local played a key transformative role in the union, especially in the dramatic campaign to organize tens of thousands of 'over-the-road' truck drivers. Tobin had tried on several occasions to purge the dissidents, to no avail. But by 1941, the Minneapolis challenge had grown intolerable to the Teamster officialdom. This pushed Tobin to invite coercive state intervention in the union, as his aides deployed provisions from the recently passed Minnesota Labor Relations Act of 1939 (MLRA) to crush the dissidents. Although Tobin emerged victorious from that battle, in the process he ended up undermining the very tenets of unionism he so resolutely defended from the convention floor in Atlantic City. The result redefined the relationship between the state and business unionism in the Teamsters.

In order to elaborate this analysis, the article proceeds as follows. I first briefly sketch out the core principles of Teamster/AFL business unionism in the 1930s. I then examine the development of the Minneapolis local as an oppositional force inside the IBT. Given that many scholars have already examined Local 574/544's role in challenging Tobin's commitment to 'craft trades' and bringing a more industrial form of unionism to the Teamsters, the primary focus in this section is on the way in which the local's efforts at building industrial organization also built them a support base within the union and the Minneapolis labor movement, making them a more formidable opponent for Tobin later on.⁵ I then examine shifting attitudes towards voluntarism and state regulation within the AFL leadership in the 1930s. The final section recounts the defeat of the Minneapolis Teamsters in 1940–41, showing how the ongoing struggle between the IBT and the Minneapolis radicals shifted the union away from its stated commitment to voluntarist 'trades autonomy'.

To explain this shift, I focus particularly on the openings created by new state labor policies of the time, in this case the 1939 MLRA. Although the law was designed to regulate labor/capital relations, the Teamster officialdom recognized that by granting state administrators the power to determine appropriate collective-bargaining units and representatives,⁶ the law also provided a mechanism to mobilize the coercive power of the state in their favor to repel the insurgent Minneapolis challenge. In deploying this mechanism, the Teamster leadership undermined its commitment to voluntarist 'trades autonomy'. Moreover, the IBT's use of the MLRA marked an important shift in the way in which the state exercised its coercive power against the labor movement, as it expanded its power to regulate the internal affairs of unions. This shift in turn foreshadowed expanded state intervention in intra-union matters in the post-war period, notably the anti-Communist provisions in the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947.

Business unionism in the 1930s

The trade union tenets to which Tobin and other AFL leaders clung so dearly consisted of two fundamental principles, as mentioned in Tobin's AFL convention speech. The first was 'craft trades' – that is, limiting union organization to small groups of skilled workers, strictly divided by trade or craft, with vigilant adherence to jurisdictional rules to maintain organizational purity. The second principle was voluntarism, which is embedded in Tobin's invocation of 'trades autonomy'. As Selig Perlman noted long ago, voluntarism privileged economic over political action, an idea that, according to him, was 'supremely correct for American conditions', since 'the economic front was the only front on which the labor army could stay united'.⁷ This does not mean that the AFL leadership of the time completely shunned politics. Rather, it means that political action was subordinate to and separate from economic activities such as collective bargaining, and narrow in its scope, eschewing broader efforts for social reform.⁸

A key characteristic of voluntarism was its resolute anti-statism, meaning that its adherents believed, as Michael Rogin put it, that 'workers could best achieve their goals by relying on their own voluntary organizations', and most certainly not by relying on the state. To the contrary, 'voluntarism defended the autonomy of the craft union against the coercive intervention of the state'. Similarly, Julie Greene defines anti-statism as 'an approach to politics that opposes most forms of state intervention and perceives government as a negative influence that should remain as limited as possible'.⁹

Taken together, these two principles – craft organization and anti-statist voluntarism – formed the basis of what can be called the 'business unionism' of the day. The term itself is a broad one, one which scholars have liberally applied to US union regimes from those of the late nineteenth century AFL up through those of the modern American mega-unions of today. However, Kim Moody identifies its foundational core when he describes it as 'a unionism that sees members primarily as consumers and limits itself to negotiating the price of labor'.¹⁰ This definition highlights the two key elements of business unionism: (1) a conceptual parallel between unions and businesses; and (2) a narrow vision of unions' purpose, particularly in the political realm.

Scholars have offered numerous explanations for the rise and resilience of what they have seen as this peculiarly American form of unionism. Some have sought to uncover the origins of business unionism, with its emergence serving as the end point of the analysis.¹¹ Others have examined the conflicts that have surfaced and resurfaced throughout the years between business unionism and its many challengers, be they the Knights of Labor, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and many others. In such accounts, business unionism tends to be treated as a fixed status quo, which the challengers of the day were trying to change.¹²

What remains under-examined in these accounts is a critical shift in the history of the US labor movement: the transformation of business unionism itself. Of course, as labor scholars have repeated often enough, AFL unions remained larger and grew faster than their CIO rivals throughout the upheaval of the 1930s.¹³ But behind this quantitative shift in the AFL unions lay a qualitative shift that was every bit as important: within a few short years, 'craft business unionism' came unmoored from

its ostensible foundation, the rock of 'craft trades' and 'trades autonomy'. In its stead arose a new 'industrial business unionism', blending innovative tactics borrowed from the radical challengers of the period with the narrow economism and political conservatism of its craft-business unionist forebears.

The case of the Minneapolis Teamsters offers some important insights into how this process unfolded, given their strategic position within one of the largest and most important AFL unions. Although in many ways the stark antithesis of the insurgent CIO unions of the time such as the United Auto Workers (UAW) or the United Electrical Workers (UE), the conservative Teamsters union was nevertheless able to expand its membership dramatically between 1933 and 1941, from 75,206 to 544,247 members.¹⁴ But behind that remarkable quantitative change laid an even deeper qualitative shift, as the union transformed itself from a small, decentralized craft union into a large, more centrally coordinated industrial transportation union. Moreover, as further elaborated below, Teamster General President Tobin and his aides discovered in this time period conditions under which the rock of 'trades autonomy', or anti-statist voluntarism, was perhaps not as solid as they initially thought. Minneapolis Local 574/544 played a key role in that transformation.

Minneapolis Teamsters and the IBT

By the early 1930s, IBT General President Tobin prided himself on having built a stable, financially sound union with clearly defined and enforced rules and regulations. He was also proud of his membership of skilled drivers, which he considered well above the 'rubbish' in other unions about which he famously complained at the 1934 AFL convention.¹⁵ Tobin had no desire to use the union as a vehicle for social change, and was concerned only with defending the specific interests of his membership. As part of this policy, Tobin was well known for refusing to support or honor other unions' strikes, pursuing instead a go-it-alone strategy.¹⁶

Meanwhile, in Minneapolis Local 574, a small group of Trotskyists led by Farrell Dobbs and the Dunne brothers – Ray, Grant, and Miles – were building something radically different from Tobin's brand of craft-business unionism. They saw the union as a social movement against a capitalist class they perceived as their mortal enemy. As such, they sought to create an organization that could forge bonds of worker solidarity and build power not only for Teamster members, but for the entire working class.¹⁷ Armed with little more than that vision, they launched an organizing drive among Minneapolis delivery drivers. By the fall of 1934 they were known nationwide as the architects of the Minneapolis truck drivers' strike.

From the beginning, relations between Tobin and the Trotskyists were strained. Tobin repeatedly tried to undermine the 1934 strike,¹⁸ and afterwards sought to dismantle Local 574, purge the Trotskyists, and re-impose craft-based organization on the Minneapolis Teamsters.¹⁹ He had Local 574's charter revoked, and in June 1935 chartered a replacement Local 500.²⁰ However, Local 500 quickly ran into trouble. Members of local 574²¹ and other unions stayed loyal to 574,²² employers refused to abandon their 574 contracts,²³ and the appointed Local 500 leadership proved to lack initiative.²⁴ Bringing in outside help did not remedy the situation.²⁵

Finally relenting, in June of 1936 Tobin proposed to merge Locals 500 and 574 into a new Local 544.²⁶ After extensive debate, the Local 574 executive board and stewards' council recommended acceptance of the proposal, and on 14 July, the IBT issued a charter for the new Local 544.²⁷ With no independent base inside the new local, the former Local 500 leadership fell in line with those from 574, and even became active proponents of the Trotskyists' more ambitious vision for the local. By the end of 1936, Local 544 was the undisputed hub of Teamster activity in the Twin Cities.²⁸

Although the deal to re-affiliate to the Teamsters as Local 544 had struck a blow against Tobin's attempts to retain 'craft trades' organization in the union, Tobin's defeat remained, at least for the time being, limited to one city. Nevertheless, buoyed by the momentum of their victory, the leaders in Minneapolis launched an organizing drive that would spread their model of industrial organization throughout the Teamsters.

Led by Dobbs, they began organizing over-the-road truck drivers, those charged with delivering freight between cities.²⁹ Working with Teamster leaders throughout the Midwest, Dobbs's North Central District Drivers Council (NCDDC) encompassed 46 locals in 11 states by the spring of 1938, and by that August had pulled together a master agreement involving 175 locals and signed by 1700 trucking companies, covering an estimated 125,000 workers. Some employers initially refused to abide by the agreement, but by December 1938, all had been brought into the fold.

This signal achievement was a critical factor in eroding the Teamsters' 'craft trades' organization, ultimately successful enough even to convince Tobin of the merits of industrial organization. Moreover, the success of the over-the-road campaign gained Local 544 important allies within the IBT. This, combined with the leadership position they had assumed in the broader Minnesota labor movement, had positioned the Minneapolis Teamsters as a force to be reckoned with in the union by the late 1930s. This in turn made it much more difficult for their opponents to dislodge them when they moved against the local in 1941. Indeed, it required the IBT craft-business unionists to rely on the very state regulations they had previously decried as a violation of 'trades autonomy'.

Voluntarism and AFL attitudes towards state regulation

By the 1930s, the AFL's adherence to a strict voluntarist program had softened. After decades of opposition, the federation lent cautious support to basic state regulation, as embodied in New Deal legislation such as the Social Security Act (SSA), the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), and the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA).³⁰ However, there were limits. Joseph Padway, long-time general counsel for the IBT and AFL, and a close advisor to Tobin, articulated the key distinction: state regulation could be fine, indeed positive, when it came to regulating labor-capital relations. What would not be tolerated would be any attempt by the state to regulate internal union matters:

First and fundamental is my objection to any Labor Board set up to handle cases involving controversies between two unions [T]he system is bound to fail unless we submit to government regulation of our internal affairs and compulsory arbitration....

That is one great fundamental objection. *It breaks down the philosophy of voluntarism* [emphasis added].³¹

Echoing this distinction in testimony given in March 1935 testimony regarding the then-pending NLRA, AFL Vice-President John Frey expressed the federation's 'very strong approval of this bill' for providing government protection of the legal right to organize. At the same time, Frey expressed concern in his remarks about the possibility of the labor board having the power to determine appropriate collective-bargaining units, previously a matter resolved exclusively within and among unions.³²

Amplifying Frey's concerns, Tobin actually went so far as to denounce the NLRA, saying it was 'better to fight the antagonisms of the employers against organizations of labor than to have the power and the machinery and the right of labor to settle its own disputes within itself, destroyed.'³³ Similarly, in February of 1936, just months after the NLRA's passage, Frey and two other top AFL leaders met with members of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to express their concern about the potentially destructive impact of Board interference in internal union affairs. Machinists union president Arthur Wharton closed the meeting by informing the government officials that, unless the Board stopped using the Act in ways the AFL believed undermined existing unions' rights, 'we will endeavour to have the law either amended or repealed because you were not created for the purpose for cutting the ground from underneath the feet of bona fide trade unions'.³⁴ As the Minneapolis Teamsters case would show, Wharton's remarks were prescient.

For their part, policymakers at the federal level involved in crafting the NLRA did not express much interest in regulating the internal affairs of labor unions. Indeed, its chief architect, Senator Robert F. Wagner, explicitly sought to reassure Tobin that '[the NLRA] was never intended to permit the Labor Board to interfere in the internal affairs of labor organizations'.³⁵

At the state level, the case of the Minnesota Labor Relations Act (MLRA) was more complex. Passed in April 1939 at the initiative of the new Republican governor, Harold Stassen, the law's main stated policy goal was 'to provide every possible means of peaceful settlement [of labor disputes] before difficulty arises'.³⁶ There is no mention in the legislative history of any intent to regulate the internal affairs of unions. Nevertheless, Stassen and other key architects of the MLRA clearly had Local 544 in mind when drafting the legislation. Stassen had just been elected in 1938 with the support of Associated Industries (AI), a powerful group of Minneapolis employers with a long track record of battling unions in general, and Local 544 in particular. He had defeated a progressive Farmer-Labor Party incumbent on a law-and-order platform, following a campaign in which labor unrest, much of it blamed on Local 544, had been a key issue.³⁷ Similarly, rural legislators grouped into a 'farm bloc' were eager to pass legislation that would restrict unions' ability to disrupt deliveries, as Local 544 had done on several occasions.³⁸

Although Stassen removed some of the more draconian measures AI was seeking in an effort to make the final bill appear more balanced, the MLRA imposed significant new restrictions on labor. Most were aimed at limiting unions' ability to affect business through strikes, pickets, or boycotts. The new law imposed waiting periods on strikes, mandatory conciliation, and strict limits on protests or picketing that interfered with travel and transportation. It also created a new set of unfair

labor practices (ULPs) that applied to workers and unions (previously ULPs had only applied to employers).³⁹

However, one small but key provision in the MLRA, also implicit in the NLRA, opened the door for greater state intervention in internal union affairs. The MLRA created the position of State Labor Conciliator, and vested in the Conciliator the power to determine appropriate units and agents for the purposes of collective bargaining.⁴⁰ Prior to the enactment of such laws, the idea that the state could arrogate to itself the power to determine which entities workers could or could not choose to represent them did not exist. When the idea was proposed, as with the NLRA in 1935, craft-business unionists denounced it. And yet, as the defeat of the Minneapolis Teamsters illustrates, this new state power provided a critical tool for the craft-business unionists to use to repel the radical challenge they faced. In so doing, the craft-business unionists moved away from their anti-statist principles and provided an opening for greater state intervention in internal union affairs, thus leading to a shift in their model of business unionism.

Away from anti-statism: the defeat of the Minneapolis Teamsters

By the late 1930s Tobin had settled into a period of détente with Local 544. Key to this was the work that Local 544 leaders had done in masterminding the over-the-road campaign. Similarly, the state and local authorities in Minneapolis, while not exactly leaving the union alone, had reached a standoff. Minnesota State Labor Conciliator Alfred P. Blair recalled that ‘the Four Musketeers [Dobbs and the three Dunne brothers] enjoyed their free reign [*sic*] in the Twin Cities’.⁴¹

All this would change rapidly in 1940.⁴² The United States was being drawn into the war in Europe, and beginning in 1939 Congress had already started passing rearmament legislation. The pace of rearmament quickened, and public support began to shift in favor of US intervention following the fall of France in June 1940. What was less sure at the time was war support from labor, which remained a house divided. Some labor officials with close ties to the Roosevelt administration, such as Amalgamated Clothing Workers head Sidney Hillman and United Auto Workers GM director (and future president) Walter Reuther, fully backed President Roosevelt’s war plans. But many others, particularly CIO chief John L. Lewis, along with those influenced by Communist Party politics, remained staunchly opposed. With war production heating up, many workers and union leaders saw an opportunity to consolidate and expand the gains from the massive industrial upsurges of the previous few years, and workers unleashed a series of ‘defense strikes’ that lasted well into the spring of 1941. Given the critical importance of the manufacturing and transportation industries in ensuring America’s preparedness for war, Roosevelt was keenly aware of the need to control labor militancy.

As a long-time ally and personal friend of Roosevelt’s, and chair of the Democratic Party’s National Labor Committee,⁴³ Tobin stood firmly behind the President’s war plans. However, he had trouble within his own union. In Minneapolis, Trotskyist-led Local 544 actively opposed US intervention in the war, which it saw as ‘a war of imperialist bandit nations, fought for the right to exploit the peoples and resources of the world’.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Local 544 was mobilizing support for its political stance in the broader Minneapolis labor

movement. On 10 April 1940, the Minneapolis Central Labor Union passed a unanimous resolution 'affirming our position of militant opposition to any attempt to involve the U.S.A. in war, and that we declare in favor of international militant working-class solidarity to stop the war'.⁴⁵ Such brazen defiance of the President's war plans within his own union put Tobin in an awkward position. With their broad support in the region and their militant, public anti-war stance, the Minneapolis Trotskyists were becoming a major problem. Tobin had to move against Local 544.⁴⁶

Tobin's job was not going to be easy. The Minneapolis Trotskyists had allies in their local and the city, as well as within the Teamster hierarchy as a result of their organizing successes in the over-the-road campaign. Dislodging them would require more than the usual tactics. As it turns out, Tobin was able to rely on outside help from three sources to get the job done this time: from within Local 544, in the form of a splinter group; from the federal government, in the form of FBI investigations; and from the state of Minnesota, in the form of the sympathetic State Labor Conciliator, Alfred P. Blair.

First, within Local 544, a group of disaffected members had formed a so-called Committee of 100.⁴⁷ This group was organized around a core of dissident members who had unsuccessfully challenged the Trotskyist leadership for office and had filed lawsuits against the local demanding greater financial oversight.⁴⁸ Although it could be easy to dismiss the committee as a group of opportunists who 'simply aspired to get for themselves the offices which the Trotskyites [*sic*] occupied',⁴⁹ they provided Tobin with a useful opening to move against the Local 544 leadership. In response to a request from the committee urging him to 'step into Minneapolis and clear up an intolerable situation',⁵⁰ Tobin held hearings in Chicago on 8 April 1941, and then summoned committee representatives and the Local 544 leadership to a 3 June hearing before the Teamster General Executive Board.⁵¹

There, Tobin took advantage of his second source of help: the FBI. Federal agents working closely with the Committee of 100 had been investigating the local for about a year, with Roosevelt's consent.⁵² Tobin quoted extensively from the agents' report in the 3 June hearing. After the hearing, Tobin asked the Local 544 leaders to sign a form requesting that their local be placed in trusteeship. They refused, citing the need to consult their membership, and agreed to call Tobin with an answer by Saturday the 7th.⁵³

Meanwhile, seeing that Tobin was trying to break up Local 544, the Minneapolis leaders had arranged a meeting in Washington with Denny Lewis of the United Construction Workers Organizing Committee, Congress of Industrial Organizations (UCWOC-CIO), about joining the CIO. They got word on Monday, 9 June that Local 544 would be awarded a CIO charter.⁵⁴

That day both Tobin and the FBI received help from a third crucial source: Minnesota State Labor Conciliator Alfred P. Blair. According to his unpublished memoir, the FBI agents had visited him on 7 June, report in hand, and 'made a request that I contact Washington, D.C. and get something moving so that they could arrange to make the necessary arrests and confiscate the necessary records to get [the Minneapolis Trotskyists] out of circulation in the labor movement'. On the 9th, he arranged a conference call including himself, Tobin, Teamster lawyers, and AFL President William Green. The group agreed on two things in that meeting: (1) Tobin was to request the services of Seattle Teamster leader Dave Beck to go and

place the Minneapolis local in trusteeship; and (2) Green was to meet with Roosevelt and 'get assurance that the proper instructions would be issued through the attorney general's office to give the FBI authority to move with dispatch'.⁵⁵

Before Beck could get to Minneapolis to impose the trusteeship, the Local 544 leadership organized a meeting of nearly 4000 members, where they voted to secede from the AFL and become Local 544 of the Motor Transport and Allied Workers Industrial Union, CIO.⁵⁶

With Local 544's secession, open warfare now erupted in Minneapolis. Hundreds of Teamster officials from across the country descended on the city in an effort to get Local 544 back into the AFL fold, by force if necessary. Particularly notable was the fearsome Michigan contingent headed by Jimmy Hoffa.⁵⁷

The battle raged on for several weeks between 544-AFL and 544-CIO,⁵⁸ but appeared to be at a standoff. Teamster organizer Joe Casey, one of the leaders of the AFL drive in Minneapolis, reported:

This thing, as far as the rank and file is concerned, is not at all stabilized.... These fellows are like a pendulum on a clock which swings back and forth – CIO – AFL – CIO – AFL, depending entirely on who was the last group that talked to them. They say that the boys have two buttons – CIO in one pocket and AFL in the other, and they don't wear any button, but when an AFL [organizer] comes up, they start putting on the AFL button.⁵⁹

Unable to bring Local 544 to heel on their own, the IBT leadership now turned to the state to tip the balance of forces in their favor. They did so in three ways. The first two methods involved familiar examples of using criminal law to harass union radicals and dissidents. However, the third instance marked a decisive erosion of 'trades autonomy' and an expansion of state regulatory power, as the IBT leadership leveraged provisions in the MLRA to invite state intervention in their internal union dispute.

First, on 17 June, District Judge (and future Minnesota Governor) Luther W. Youngdahl dealt a serious financial and material blow to the dissidents by awarding possession of 544-CIO's headquarters and all its contents to the 544-AFL.⁶⁰ Second, on 15 July, a federal grand jury acting on the FBI report indicted twenty-nine 544-CIO activists and supporters on charges of sedition and conspiracy to overthrow the government under the Smith Act.⁶¹ This came one day after four 544-CIO officers and staff members were indicted for embezzlement and grand larceny. The constant legal harassment and the resources spent defending against the charges took a serious toll on 544-CIO's ability to defend itself.⁶²

The third and decisive instance of state intervention both constituted a shift away from the anti-statist voluntarism of the IBT craft-business unionists, and marked a dramatic expansion of state power over the internal affairs of labor unions. On 19 September, Minnesota State Labor Conciliator Blair, using the power vested in him by the MLRA to determine what is and is not a legitimate bargaining unit, issued his decision regarding who should be recognized as the sole legitimate bargaining agent for all trucking industry employees in Minneapolis.⁶³ Not surprisingly, given his actions in June, he ignored 544-CIO's repeated requests for a MRLA-sanctioned election to decide the matter, and unilaterally awarded the bargaining rights to 544-AFL. This decision effectively stripped 544-CIO of its legal standing as a union, and automatically awarded all 544-CIO contracts and members to 544-AFL.⁶⁴

Besieged by armies of union staff, stripped of its material resources, tied up with criminal charges, and denied its legal standing to represent workers, 544-CIO had effectively been reduced to a union in name only; 544-AFL had won, and Tobin had successfully purged the Minneapolis Trotskyists from the Teamsters. However, in so doing, he and his IBT allies had been forced to abandon the anti-statist core of their craft-business unionist model, which in turn dramatically redefined the political relationship between their union and the state. The stage was set for industrial-business unionism to come to the fore in the Teamsters.

Conclusion

It is unlikely that Daniel Tobin had any idea when he took the floor of the AFL convention in 1935 what his Teamsters union would look like just six years later. He steadfastly believed that his union was firmly ensconced upon the rock of 'craft trades' and 'trades autonomy'. And yet, by 1941, the Teamsters had come unmoored from that rock. Led by Trotskyists such as Farrell Dobbs and the Dunne brothers, the Minneapolis Teamsters had mounted an insurgent challenge to Tobin's craft-business unionism. Starting from their base in the Twin Cities and radiating outwards across the Midwest and Great Plains, they sought to develop a new, more radical model for the Teamsters. Thanks in large part to new forms of coercive state intervention, Tobin was able to fend off the Minneapolis challenge. However, in doing so he was unable to hold on to his principles of craft organization and voluntarism. Instead, Tobin's craft-business unionism was supplanted by a new form of industrial-business unionism. Over the next several decades, as the union rose in national prominence and became more coordinated under the leadership of General Presidents Dave Beck and especially Jimmy Hoffa, it was this model of industrial-business unionism that would prevail in the Teamsters.

Moreover, the redefinition of state-labor relations that came out of the defeat of the Minneapolis Teamsters had lasting consequences not only for the Teamsters, but for the US labor movement as a whole. In August 1940, Minnesota Governor Stassen appointed a close confidant of his, Joseph Ball, to fill a vacant US Senate seat. Consulting with Stassen, AI, and the Minnesota Employers Association (MEA), Ball quickly became an advocate for pushing MLRA-style labor reforms even further at the federal level. In January 1941 he introduced the Defense Industry Conciliation Act, popularly known as the 'Ball Bill'.⁶⁵ Mirroring the MLRA, the bill would have imposed waiting periods for strikes and mandatory conciliation. The bill failed, but Ball persisted with new legislation, and over the next few years positioned himself as one of the leaders of an emerging anti-labor coalition in Congress. By 1947 that coalition was strong enough to pass the Taft-Hartley Act over President Truman's veto.⁶⁶

With its provisions for cooling-off periods before strikes, conciliation boards, union-side unfair labor practices, and restrictions on secondary boycotts and picketing, Taft-Hartley in many ways reflected its MLRA pedigree.⁶⁷ No provision was more telling, though, than the anti-Communist measures in Section 9(h), which denied recognition or recourse through the NLRB to any labor organization whose officers did not file an affidavit with the Board attesting to their non-membership of the Communist Party or other such organization. Simply put, the state refused to

recognize suspected Communist unions as legitimate bargaining agents. In the same way that the IBT used the Minnesota State Labor Conciliator's power to determine appropriate bargaining representatives to destroy the Trotskyist-led Local 544, so too did the IBT use Taft-Hartley's Section 9(h) to strip recognition from and raid the membership of Communist-led unions such as the United Electrical Workers (UE), the Mine Mill and Smelter Workers (IUMMSW) and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU).⁶⁸

The industrial-business unionists of the IBT quickly adapted to the state's more expansive role in their union in the post-war period, and turned it to their advantage. They became masterful users of the state's bargaining agent recognition machinery to expand their membership and control internal dissent.⁶⁹ In general, the Teamsters in the post-war decades were by far the most frequent petitioners in NLRB representation elections, typically involved in between a quarter and a third of all elections in any given year.⁷⁰ But more specifically, they were especially active in multi-union elections, otherwise known as raiding. They were involved in between one third and two fifths of such elections.⁷¹ While much of this activity simply represented competing unions trying to increase their membership rolls at the another's expense – including other unions' attempts to claim Teamster bargaining units – some also was related to the Teamsters' notorious practice of offering themselves to employers as a sweetheart alternative to a more militant union.⁷² The tools first used in Minneapolis continued to serve the Teamsters well.

Indeed, as Beck and Hoffa, both veterans of the Minneapolis purge, worked to shape the Teamsters into the dominant force it remained for several decades, it was their brand of industrial business unionism that emerged ascendant in the post-war period, eclipsing the idealism of the early CIO – and Local 544. Energetic, ruthless, influenced by the innovative tactics of their more radical counterparts, and much less beholden to notions of 'trades autonomy' or 'craft trades', they nonetheless steadfastly preserved the narrow economism and political conservatism of their craft-business unionist forebears.⁷³

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kim Voss, Neil Fligstein, Dylan Riley, Howard Kimeldorf, Barbara Harvey, Margaret Levi, Benjamin Moodie, Judith Stepan-Norris, Nicholas Hoover Wilson, and the participants in the 2006 colloquium series of the UC Berkeley Center on Culture, Organizations, and Politics for their invaluable assistance. Special thanks go to the *Labor History* editors and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments, as well as to the archivists at the Minnesota and Wisconsin Historical Societies. Previous versions of this article were presented at the 2006 'Union Democracy Reexamined' conference at the University of Washington (co-sponsored by *Politics & Society*), and the 2006 annual meetings of the American Sociological Association and the Midwest Political Science Association. Research support for this project was provided by the National Science Foundation (Graduate Research Fellowship and Award no. 0517735), the Oberlin College Alumni Association, and the University of California Labor and Employment Research Fund.

Notes

1. American Federation of Labor, *Report of the proceedings of the fifty-fifth annual convention*, 659.

2. American Federation of Labor, *Report of the proceedings of the fifty-fifth annual convention*, 653.
3. While the official name of the union is the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen and Helpers of America, in this article I will refer to it by its more familiar shorthand names, simply 'the Teamsters' or 'the IBT'.
4. The local under investigation switches local numbers during the time period in question. From 1934 to 1935, it is known as Local 574. From 1935 onward, it is known as Local 544. When referring to the union in specific time periods, I will use the appropriate number. When speaking of the local in general, I will refer to it as Local 574/544.
5. The definitive study of the Minneapolis Teamsters is Farrell Dobbs's four-volume memoir, consisting of *Teamster Rebellion*, *Teamster Power*, *Teamster Politics*; and *Teamster Bureaucracy*. For a capsule summary, see Galenson, *CIO Challenge to the AFL*, 478–88. For an account from the viewpoint of the employers, see Millikan, *Union against Unions*, 264–357. The classic account of the 1934 labor 'eruption', in which the Minneapolis Teamsters played a key role, is Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 217–315. Others include Brecher, *Strike!*, 166–92; Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 19–33; Karsh and Garman, *Impact of the Political Left*, 19–33; Lens, *Crisis of American Labor*, 19–33. A contemporaneous chronicle of the 1934 Truck Drivers Strike can be found in Walker, *American City*. For more recent retellings, see Korth, *Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*; Schultz, *Conflict and Change*. For an examination of the Minneapolis Teamsters' broader impact on the IBT, particularly their role in organizing over-the-road drivers, as well as the story of their defeat, see James and James, *Hoffa and the Teamsters*, 89–127, and 'Purge of the Trotskyites'.
6. A collective-bargaining unit is a group of workers covered under a single collective-bargaining agreement. A collective-bargaining representative is an organization that represents workers in a collective-bargaining unit in negotiations with management.
7. Perlman, *Theory of the Labor Movement*, 197.
8. Hattam, *Labor Visions and State Power*; Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics*; Gordon, *New Deals*, 88–92.
9. Rogin, 'Voluntarism', 521–2. Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics*, 3.
10. Moody, *An Injury to All*, xiv.
11. Davis, 'Why the US Working Class is Different'; Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics*; Hattam, *Labor Visions and State Power*; Laurie, 'Prudential Unionism'; Taft, 'On the Origins of Business Unionism'.
12. For the Knights of Labor, see Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy*; Voss, *Making of American Exceptionalism*. The authoritative history of the IWW is Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*. For a more contemporaneous account, see Saposs, *Left Wing Unionism*. The scholarship on the CIO can be the subject of an entire bibliographic essay in its own right, but a few of the seminal works are: Galenson, *CIO Challenge*; and Zieger, *The CIO*. For a colorful, polemical, but nevertheless useful account of the CIO, see Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*. There is also a great deal of scholarship that chronicles the conflicts within the AFL leading up to the CIO split, including Morris, *Conflict within the AFL*; and Taft, *The A. F. of L.* As many note, including David Brody in his influential essay 'The Origins of Mass Production Unionism' in Brody, *Workers in Industrial America*, it is in some ways problematic to consider the CIO to be a fundamental challenge to the AFL's model, since some AFL leaders had been discussing the need for industrial organization, and the future CIO leaders saw their project as one that could be accomplished inside the AFL. However, what these accounts confirm is that, whatever plans for federal unions they might have had, the AFL leaders clung tenaciously to their ideals of 'craft trades' and 'trades autonomy', and the expulsion of the CIO from the AFL in 1936 represented the failure of the industrial unionists to dislodge those fundamental organizational commitments within the AFL. Thus, these accounts still don't adequately explain the transformation of business unionism within the AFL.
13. Tomlins, 'AFL Unions in the 1930s'.
14. Leiter, *The Teamsters Union*, 39.
15. American Federation of Labor, *Report of the Proceedings of the Fifty-fourth Annual Convention*, 453.

16. Leiter, *Teamsters Union*, 31; Galenson, *CIO Challenge*, 467; Witwer, *Corruption and Reform*, 67–70.
17. Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 41.
18. See, for example, Tobin's editorial in the July 1934 edition of the *Teamster* magazine (pp. 13–15), where he denounces the strike leaders as 'serpents' and 'wolves in sheep's clothing'. Minneapolis employers published the editorial as a paid advertisement in the 7 July 1934 edition of the *Minneapolis Tribune*.
19. Hughes, Letter to Dobbs, 15 April 1935.
20. Tobin, Letter to Geary, 4 June 1935; Teamsters Local 574, Letter from Local 574; Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 70; Galenson, *CIO Challenge*, 479; Geary, Letter to Tobin, 25 June 1935.
21. Halverson, Letter to Local 574 Executive Board.
22. IAM Local 382, Letter to IBT General President Daniel J. Tobin; Minutes of Trade Union Conference.
23. Geary, Letter to Tobin, 29 October 1935.
24. Geary, Letter to Tobin, 3 November 1935.
25. Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 99–122; Galenson, *CIO Challenge*, 478–81; James and James, 'Purge of the Trotskyites', 6; Tobin, Letter to Geary, 27 March 1936; Geary, Letter to Tobin, 9 April 1936.
26. Dobbs, Report to Local 574 Executive Board.
27. Dobbs, Report to Local 574 Executive Board; Local 574 Stewards Council, Minutes of Stewards' Council Meeting; Local 544 Executive Board, Press Release. In issuing the charter, which would allow the previous Local 574 leadership back into the Teamsters, Tobin suddenly discovered the nuances of the various factions on the far left, declaring that the IBT's ban on Communists applied only to those who were members of the Communist Party, and not to Trotskyists like Dobbs and the Dunne brothers. See James and James, 'Purge of the Trotskyites', 6.
28. Geary, Letter to John M. Gillespie, 25 August 1936; Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 134–6, 144, 159.
29. Unless otherwise noted, information about the Teamsters' over-the-road organizing campaign is taken from Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 145–55, 169–87, 198–241; Galenson, *CIO Challenge*, 478–88; James and James, *Hoffa and the Teamsters*, 89–101; as well as documents from the IBT Papers, available upon request. It is important to recognize that Dobbs was not the only one organizing over-the-road drivers at this point. On the west coast, Dave Beck of Seattle was doing something similar. The key difference was Dobbs's understanding that, as James and James (*Hoffa and the Teamsters*, 96) put it, 'the ultimate purpose [wa]s centralized area-wide bargaining designed to establish uniform wages, hours, and working conditions' (emphasis added). Beck did not understand organizing in the strategic sense that Dobbs (and later Hoffa) did. Rather, in an effort to expand his reach, Beck remained focused on matching union demands with the employer's perceived 'ability to pay'. As such, his 'master agreements' allowed considerable local and regional variation. Furthermore, in the craft tradition, Beck's agreements often only included the actual drivers, leaving helpers and inside workers covered under a multitude of local agreements. See Garnel, *Rise of Teamster Power*.
30. American Federation of Labor, *Report of Proceedings of Fifty-fourth Convention*, 74, 100–6, 155–6, 545, 548, and *Report of Proceedings of Fifty-fifth Convention*, 51–2, 135, 493–5; Galenson, *CIO Challenge*, 610–21; Taft, *A. F. of L.*, 277–81; Vittoz, *New Deal Labor Policy*, 133, 149; Brandeis, 'Organized Labor', 217–30; Witte, 'Organized Labor', 249–50.
31. Padway, 'Comments on Government Regulation'.
32. *Legislative History of the National Labor Relations Act 1935 (1949)*. Hearings before Senate Committee on Education and Labor, Seventy-fourth Congress, first session, on S. 1958: Part II (March 15–19): 1580–81, 1583.
33. Letter from Tobin to Wagner, 13 December 1935, quoted in Tomlins, *State and the Unions*, 144.
34. AFL Executive Council minutes, 10 February 1937, quoted in Tomlins, *State and the Unions*, 145.
35. Wagner, Letter to Daniel J. Tobin.
36. *Minnesota Law Review*, 'Labor Legislation', 225.

37. *Minnesota Law Review*, 'Labor Legislation', 219; Millikan, *Union against Unions*, 344–9.
38. *Minnesota Law Review*, 'Labor Legislation', 222.
39. *Minnesota Law Review*, 'Labor Legislation', 226–8.
40. Millikan, *Union against Unions*, 347; *Minnesota Law Review*, 'Labor Legislation', 226. Millikan attributes the creation of this provision in the MLRA to Minnesota Employers Association attorney Charles Elmquist. The relevant language in the NLRA is found in Section 9(b).
41. Blair, *Storm Over the Union*.
42. Much of the following description of broader labor politics surrounding the war is based on accounts in Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home*, 26–66; Kersten, *Labor's Home Front*, 18–40; and Zieger and Gall, *American Workers, American Unions*, 104–43.
43. Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 45; Leiter, *Teamsters Union*, 41; Garnel, *Rise of Teamster Power*, 43–4; James and James, *Hoffa and the Teamsters*, 103; Galenson, *CIO Challenge*, 465.
44. *Northwest Organizer*, 25 May 1940.
45. *Northwest Organizer*, 18 April 1940.
46. Unlike Communist-influenced unionists, the Trotskyists remained steadfast in their characterization of the war as being one of inter-imperialist rivalry, even after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, which caused all those who adhered to Moscow's line to switch overnight into fervent proponents of US intervention. For example, in the 26 June 1941 *Northwest Organizer*, they state: '[W]ith the expansion of the war, we can anticipate many strange reversals of policy by all sorts of unprincipled groups [referring undoubtedly to the Communists]. We can further anticipate that those beating the drums to involve the United States in the war will now beat them louder. All our sympathies in this situation lie with the workers and peasants of Russia, against Hitler's fascist gangs. But we are as firmly opposed as ever to the entrance of the United States into the war.' This shift by the Communists left the Minneapolis Trotskyists further isolated and more prone to government attack at precisely the moment when their battle with the IBT erupted into open warfare, as chronicled later in this article.
47. The name was meant to echo that adopted by the committee that led the 1934 Minneapolis truck drivers' strikes. However, it is highly unlikely that the committee ever actually had 100 members. The name would soon change to 'Committee of 99' when one of the main leaders died of a heart attack. See Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 85–6, 103.
48. Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 59–72, 81–7.
49. James and James, *Hoffa and the Teamsters*, 103.
50. Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 103; James and James, 'Purge of the Trotskyites', 6.
51. Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 114.
52. Blair, *Storm Over the Union*; Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 101.
53. Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 99–117.
54. Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 117–19. Lewis's UCWOC was not only causing problems for the Teamsters in Minneapolis. In the early 1940s, the UCWOC was mounting incursions into Teamster jurisdictions in other cities as well. For a vivid, blow-by-blow account of how these battles played out in Detroit, see Russell, *Out of the Jungle*, 66–100. Also see James and James, 'Purge of the Trotskyites', 11–13. As such, Local 544's decision to ally with Lewis had the effect of tying their conflict with the IBT to the union's broader conflict with the CIO.
55. Blair, *Storm Over the Union*.
56. Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 119–20; James and James, 'Purge of the Trotskyites', 7. Several other Teamster locals in the area also followed Local 544 into the CIO, and even among those who did not, their loyalty to the IBT was questionable at best. Joseph Padway, Teamsters counsel, told Tobin that 'the officers of the Joint Council are very friendly to the Dunnes and it is my belief that some of them worked with them on this secession.... They may urge their unions to swing over if they think it is to their advantage to do so.' Quoted in James and James, *Hoffa and the Teamsters*, 107.
57. Blair, *Storm Over the Union*; Russell, *Out of the Jungle*, 81; Millikan, *Union against Unions*, 353. While Hoffa dutifully worked to purge the Trotskyists, he retained an abiding respect for their organizing ability and the role they played in building the

- Teamsters. Indeed, it was from the Local 544 leaders, especially Dobbs, that Hoffa learned many of the organizing tactics he would use in the campaign that culminated in the signing of the National Master Freight Agreement in 1964. See James and James, *Hoffa and the Teamsters*, 89–127. Years after the purge, Hoffa described Dobbs as ‘a very far-seeing individual... the draftsman and architect of our road operations’. Quoted in James and James, *Hoffa and the Teamsters*, 91.
58. The IBT reconstituted Local 544 under new leadership once the Trotskyist-led local bolted to the CIO.
 59. Casey, Phone call to Thomas E. Flynn.
 60. ‘544-CIO Statement on seizure by AFL’, *Minneapolis Star-Journal*, 18 June 1941, p. 1L.
 61. The Communists cheered the Trotskyists’ arrest under the Smith Act at the time. The 16 August 1941 issue of the *Daily Worker* editorialized: ‘The Communist Party has always exposed, fought against and today joins in the fight to exterminate the Trotskyite [*sic*] Fifth Column from the life of our nation.’ Quoted in Preis, *Labor’s Giant Step*, 141. Little did they know that the US government, which cared little for nuances such as the differences between Communists and Trotskyists, would use the same law to prosecute twelve of their own in 1948.
 62. For at least one of the defendants, the toll was too much. On 4 October 1941, shortly before the group was to go to trial, Grant Dunne killed himself.
 63. This situation raises the question of why the 544-AFL/544-CIO jurisdictional battle was settled under the Minnesota law, as opposed to the NLRA. In general, states began developing labor relations laws of their own soon after the Wagner Act was found constitutional in 1937. These laws were designed to cover workers in businesses that were not engaged in interstate commerce, which is the coverage criterion for the NLRA. See Heaney, ‘Labor Relations’, 363–6; Smith and DeLancey, ‘State Legislatures and Unionism’, 996–1001. But even though truck drivers and other workers in the transfer industry would clearly be considered to be engaged in interstate commerce by most standards, the Minneapolis transfer industry was held to be covered under the state act, along with several other interstate commerce-related industries. See Heaney, ‘Labor Relations’, 367 n.61. This determination allowed the case to proceed under state instead of federal law. Although strange, this is unsurprising for two reasons. First, jurisdictional boundaries between the state and federal levels were still unclear at this time, which predated the establishment of the doctrine of federal ‘preemption’ of state labor laws, particularly around issues of bargaining unit determination. Federal preemption was only firmly established in 1959 with the decision in *San Diego Building Trades Council v. Garmon*, 359 U.S. 236. See Hafer, ‘Pragmatic Article’, 288; Ackerman, ‘Problem of Jurisdiction’, 361; Cox, ‘Labor Law Preemption Revisited’, 1337–8. Second, more specific to the Local 544 case, employers and conservative politicians, especially the ‘farm bloc’, had specifically invoked the threat of Local 544 in justifying the need for the law (see *Minnesota Law Review*, ‘Labor Legislation’, 222, 231; Millikan, *Union against Unions*, 343–50; Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 150–9). It thus makes sense that state agents would find that Minneapolis transfer industry workers were covered by the state law. It is also worth noting that the IBT held a distinct advantage in filing its petition for bargaining unit certification at the state rather than the federal level, as the state law accorded the state labor conciliator broad powers to determine bargaining units as he saw fit, with or without representation elections (see Doan, ‘State Labor Relations Acts’, 539–40; Heaney and Latz, ‘Minnesota and National Labor Relations Acts’, 745). This provided Blair with the legal basis to recognize 544-AFL without holding a representation election.
 64. *Minneapolis Star-Journal*, 19 September 1941, 1; Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy*, 158–63; Millikan, *Union against Unions*, 353–7.
 65. Defense Industry Conciliation Act of 1941.
 66. Millikan, *Union against Unions*, 352–62.
 67. Although the Taft-Hartley Act drew heavily on the MLRA, it was by no means a direct descendant. Several other states also passed laws in this period that sought to restrict labor, and they too served as templates for the national law.
 68. Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, *Left Out*, 9 n.23; Tomlins, *State and the Unions*, 323–4; Bortz and Weiss, ‘Annual Conventions’, 7; Mulroy, ‘Taft-Hartley Act in Action’, 616 n.79. It is

- important to stress that the Teamsters were far from alone in their raiding of Communist-led unions.
69. See, for example, the account of James R. Hoffa's 1963 quashing of an insurgent reform movement in Philadelphia Local 107 in Witwer, *Corruption and Reform*, 226–34. Although Hoffa had to go through an actual representation election in this case, instead of having state agents unilaterally recognize his organization as the legitimate bargaining representative, he showed his masterful control of the election process by mounting a campaign that defeated the reformers by a two-to-one margin.
 70. Fogel, 'Teamsters and NLRB Representation Elections', 651; Goldfield, *Decline of Organized Labor*, 210–12.
 71. Krislov, 'Raiding among the Legitimate Unions' and 'Organizational Rivalry'; Fogel, 'Teamsters and NLRB Representation Elections', 652, Table 1; Odewahn and Scott, 'Analysis of Multi-union Elections', 203, Table 4.
 72. Feldman, 'New Teamsters', 567, 579–80; Allison, 'American Labor in 1957', 6–7; Vitiello, 'Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations', 686; Krissman, 'Agribusiness Strategies', 222.
 73. Davis, 'Barren Marriage', 59; Garnel, *Rise of Teamster Power*, 64–91; James and James, *Hoffa and the Teamsters*, 78–127; Neuberger, 'Labor's Overlords'.

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- Archival abbreviations:* IBT Papers = International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen, and Helpers of America Papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI; 574 Papers = Minneapolis Teamsters Strike, 1934: Selected documents, 1928–1941, Manuscript Collection Microfilm Call # M494, held at the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.
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