

JULY 30, 2024

## Teamsters Über Alles?

BY JOE ALLEN



**Sean M. O'Brien**  
@TeamsterSOB

Follow



Always will defend... Never Disrespect...Never  
desecrate.... 🇺🇸 🇺🇸 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

[#usagainsteverybody](#)



5:24 AM · 7/25/24 · **80K** Views

**127** Reposts **95** Quotes **777** Likes **9** Bookmarks

Screen shot from Facebook.

Teamster General President Sean O'Brien's speech before the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee was a public relation's fiasco. His fawning praise for former President Donald Trump ("one tough S.O.B") to his shout outs to Josh Hawley and JD Vance, two U.S. Senators closely aligned with European Fascism and anti-union politics, along with

the enthusiastic applause from fascist-friendly commentator Tucker Carlson, are unforgettable. Scenes like these and a prime time speaking slot are usually reserved for rising stars of the far right, not union leaders.

Even before O'Brien took the stage in Milwaukee, John Palmer, the only dissenting voice on the Teamsters General Executive Board (GEB), told the *Guardian*:

“It is unconscionable for any labor leader to lend an air of legitimacy to a candidate and a political party, neither of which can be said to have done, or can be expected to do, anything to improve the lives of the workers we are pledged to represent. The Teamsters conducted a poll of which the majority of members chose not to support Donald Trump.”

Few followed Palmer's lead before the convention and many others waited to see what O'Brien had to say. Notably missing from O'Brien's speech was any reference to former President Donald Trump's attempted presidential coup on January 6, 2022, or the widespread support among the delegates for his coup plotting and threats to be “a dictator.” No reference to curtailing voting rights or Trump's threats of mass deportations of refugees and immigrants. His silence on these critical and unavoidable issues, along with his reference to the “American worker” gave the impression that the Teamsters and Trump were on the same page.

Soon after he concluded his speech, condemnation of him came quickly. Liz Shuler, the President of the AFL-CIO, the main trade union federation that the Teamsters are not affiliated with, released a statement that said, “Donald Trump and J.D. Vance are on the bosses' side. We won't be fooled.” Matthew Biggs, president of the 90,000-member International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers, told the *Washington Post*:

“It’s disappointing to see a national labor leader speak like that at the GOP convention. Make no mistake about it, their intent is to crush federal unions and have mass firings of federal employees and turn the government into an at-will employer where people are hired and fired based on their political leanings.”

Other union leaders and Teamster rank and file activists piled on. Labor journalist Hamilton Nolan called O’Brien a “patsy,” while fellow labor journalist and activist Talia Jane called him a “scab.” O’Brien responded to public criticism by further demonstrating his support for Josh Hawley by tweeting in support of Hawley’s article (“The Promise of Pro-Labor Conservatism”, where he condemned corporate initiatives around diversity, equity, inclusion, and transgender workers. Hawley wrote in the fascist-leaning *Compact* magazine, the day after O’Brien spoke at the RNC:

The C-suite long ago sold out the United States, shuttering factories in the homeland and gutting American jobs, while using the profits to push diversity, equity, and inclusion and the religion of the trans flag.

O’Brien tweeted “@HawleyMO is 100% on point.”

Some O’Brien supporters on social media tried to deflect criticism by pointing to him calling out corporate greed and condemning major non-union corporations, such as Amazon. But, many of these same, not all, corporations are the targets of the mainstream and far right for their “woke capitalism” or what used to be called corporate liberalism. One brave Teamster staffer with access to the union’s social media attacked O’Brien:

“Unions gain nothing from endorsing the racist, misogynistic, and anti-trans politics of the far right, no

matter how much people like Sen. Hawley attempt to tether such bigotry to a cynical pro-labor message. The message this sends to Teamsters of color, Teamster women, and LGBTQ Teamsters is that they are not welcome in the union unless they surrender their identity to a new kind of anti-woke unionism. You don't unite a diverse working class by scoffing at its diversity."

It was later deleted.

When O'Brien received an email from Chris Fuentes, the national President of the official Teamsters LGBTQ+ caucus, expressing his concern about the tweet in support of Hawley, his mealy mouthed response was totally disingenuous.

O'Brien wrote:

"My resharing of the article was meant to further highlight the call for bipartisanship labor reform and was in no way intended to support negative criticism of social issue."

"It is certainly regrettable that my retweet has caused consternation and confusion among members of the LGBTQ+ Caucus."

Then why did O'Brien say Hawley was 100% on point?

With the Teamsters and O'Brien coming under heavy criticism, a siege mentality has gripped the union with pressure on well-known Teamster activists to demonstrate loyalty to O'Brien. Many changed their social media profile to display pictures of them arm-in-arm with him, while a new hashtag has appeared — #usagainsteverybody — promoting T-shirts that boldly proclaim "Teamsters vs. Everybody."

O'Brien on his Facebook page displayed an American Flag with the same hashtag in response to pro-Palestine demonstrations against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu in Washington, D.C. The Teamsters are one of the few major unions that have not called for a ceasefire in Gaza.

### **The Left and O'Brien**

Has the tide turned against O'Brien? It wasn't very long ago that there were only a handful of voices speaking out against O'Brien and his administration. The sharp turn against O'Brien includes *Labor Notes* and *Jacobin* magazine, who up until recently were his boosters. So, it's good see *Labor Notes* editor Alexandra Bradbury taking O'Brien straight on:

Union leaders, though, should lead. They owe it to their own members — and to every member of the working class who would be harmed by a second Trump administration — to fight to keep anti-worker politicians out of office.

We get why union leaders want “access”; they've been shut out of real influence for so long. But it's delusional to think that Trump might swap out his anti-worker — really, anti-humanity — policies; they are at the core of his being. One more person kissing his ring won't change that.

I was really happy to see her address his rank xenophobia, Bradbury wrote:

The most ominous theme in O'Brien's speech was nationalism. He hammered on the phrase “American workers” and said Amazon's worst crime is a lack of allegiance to the United States — aligning nicely with right-wing “America First” talking points. Yet his audience was the same party that opposes warehouse safety bills, opposes bills to make it easier to organize a union, and opposes the joint-employer rules that would hold Amazon accountable.

Alex Press writing in *Jacobin* captured the bewilderment of many rank-and-file Teamsters:

For Teamsters members who understand it as such, many of whom devoted countless hours to helping O'Brien win the union's presidency over James P. Hoffa's chosen successor, watching their elected president assist in such a project is excruciating.

Working-class independence is indeed the only way workers will wrest power and resources from employers and the many elected officials who do their bidding. Flattering the GOP, however, is anything but that.

As O'Brien put it on the RNC stage, union leaders cannot keep pursuing the same strategies as their predecessors; their members cannot allow them to do so. O'Brien and Fain [Shawn Fain, UAW President] are offering two versions of what "different" entails. One is a path to greater working-class independence. The other? To greater working-class humiliation.

Yet, Bradbury wrote that him speaking at the RNC "was a bad move," while "much of the speech would have been fine if he had delivered it somewhere else." Maybe so, but I think we have to speak more clearly about the sinister plotting that is going on here by O'Brien. Bradbury leaves out that Fain endorsed Biden and will likely endorse Vice-President Kamala Harris, this is not independence but the traditional trap of mainstream Democratic Party politics in the U.S.

What is also missing from Bradbury and Press' reevaluation of O'Brien is any accountability for the role the left played in promoting him. Soon after he was elected General President of the Teamsters, he was welcomed uncritically at the 2022 *Labor Notes* conference. Despite his private meeting with Trump in Mar-a-Lago in January and Trump's meeting with the union's executive board, O'Brien was welcomed again at

this year's Labor Notes conference, where he did a major fundraiser for the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU).

The TDU, the former reform group that has roots in the rank and file movements in the 1970s, has traveled very far from its radical origins as a political project of the International Socialists. Today, it is a comfortable part of the O'Brien administration and serves as an attack dog against critics, especially those on the left, while defending some of the worst practices of the leadership. TDU's leadership, notably Ken Paff and David Levine have a special animus towards former allies and the left, regularly preventing socialist activists from attending the TDU convention. O'Brien shares their animus, he threw the RNC delegates some red meat when I told the crowd, "the left call me a traitor" for agreeing to speak in Milwaukee.

Tom Leedham, a three-time reform candidate for the leadership of the Teamsters supported by TDU each time, and Dan LaBotz, an historian of TDU, wrote:

"In the past, Teamsters for a Democratic Union would have taken up issues such as those raised above [automation, racism]. But TDU's "coalition" with O'Brien has led to the organization's total loss of independence and subordination to the O'Brien administration."

TDU has clearly reached the end of the road as a project of the left in the United States. Sean O'Brien's speech at the RNC wasn't about demonstrating the independence of his union or promoting bipartisanship, it was about coddling up to the far right in the Republican Party and making common cause with many of its most prominent fascist-leaning politicians. A new left needs to be built in the Teamsters.

*JOE ALLEN is the author of The Package King: A Rank and File History of United Parcel Service.*

---

**CounterPunch**

Tells the Facts and Names  
the Names  
Published since 1996  
Copyright ©  
CounterPunch  
All rights reserved.  
counterpunch@counterp  
unch.org

**Administration**

Becky Grant  
**Administrative Director**  
Deva Wheeler  
**Director of E-commerce  
and Sales**  
counterpunchbiz@gmail.  
com

**Editorial**

Jeffrey St. Clair, **Editorial  
Director**  
Joshua Frank, **Managing  
Editorial Director**  
Nathaniel St. Clair,  
**Associate Editorial  
Director**  
Alexander Cockburn, 1941  
—2012

**Mailing Address**

CounterPunch  
PO Box 228  
Petrolia, CA 95558

**Telephone**

Nichole Stephens,  
Administrative Assistant  
1(707) 629-3683

