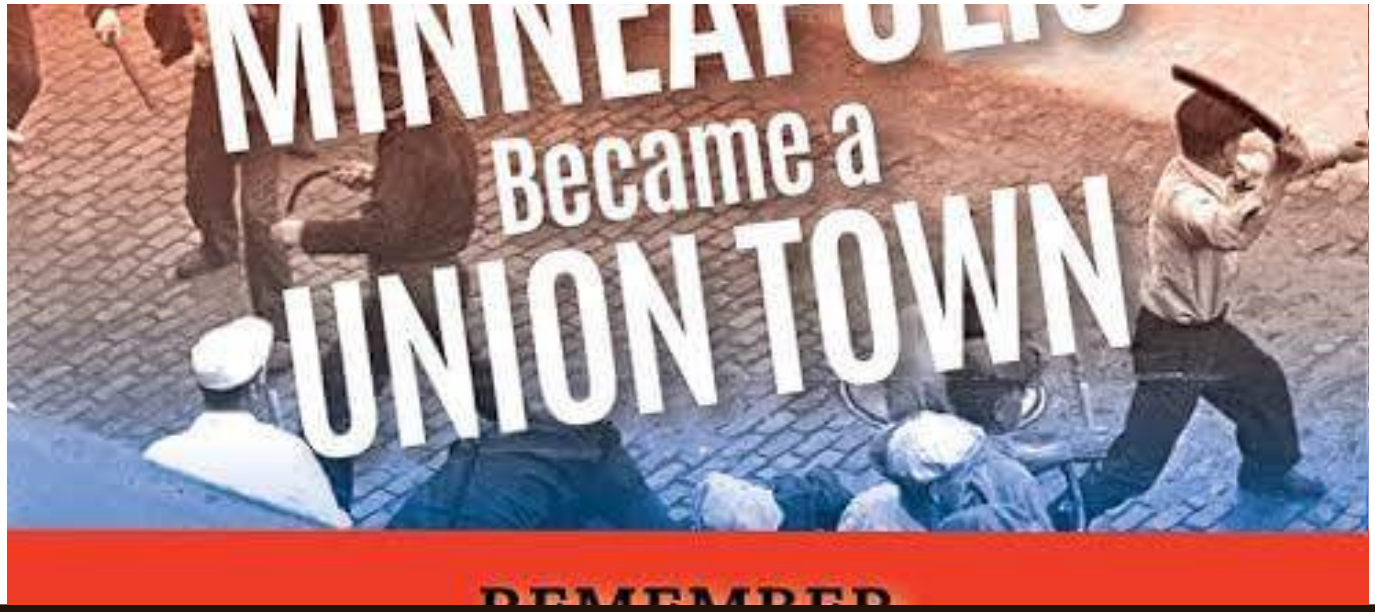


Dining Out in Dinkytown: Remembering the Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934

Posted on November 7, 2014 by Bryan Palmer

This is a different and expanded version of a previously published essay that appeared in Jacobin.

Dinkytown's Best Breakfast

If you are in Minneapolis, after a hard day's night, the place to go for a morning pick-me-up is Al's Breakfast. Or so I was informed. Being in the Twin Cities in mid-July, I made my way to the legendary AM eatery, located in the heart of Dinkytown, the neighborhood adjacent to the University of Minnesota where Al's is located.

Mind you, no one had told me anything about the place. My heart sank as I rounded the 14th Avenue corner and took in the line that had formed outside of an establishment half way down the block. As I shuffled into place at the end of the queue and glanced inside my spirits nose-dived even further.

Al's Breakfast, 2005

The place wasn't so much a restaurant as a refurbished alleyway. Indeed, its origins, I later ascertained, were just that. The space was once a converted corridor separating two stores, first used to stockpile sheet metal and plumbing parts by a hardware outlet. It was 'made-over' into a restaurant in 1950. At ten feet wide, with a mere fourteen stools, its mid-century clientele consisted largely of railroad workers.

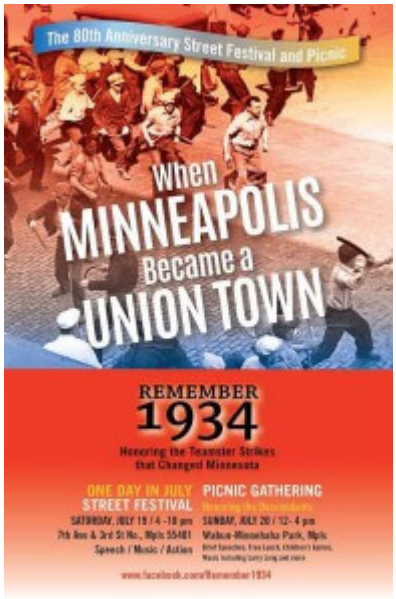
Over the years Al's has become renowned for its waffles, blueberry pancakes, and ingenious egg concoctions, its quick-paced pack-'em-in bravado, and the banter of its wait staff and cooks. No time is wasted on the pseudo-niceties of sycophantic service. Placards on the wall set the tone: 'Not Responsible for Alienated Affections'; 'Beware of Waitress With An Attitude'. But the place wins national awards, attracts the cognoscenti, and clearly has strong advocates.

Not much of this was evident as I waited outside behind fifteen or so hungry patrons. Another dozen stood inside Al's, leaning against the wall and looming over the shoulders of the fortunately-seated customers. I wondered if I would eat before noon.

The four guys in front of me must have sensed my unease, appreciating that I was a first timer. 'Don't worry,' they assured me, 'the line moves quickly'. 'Where are you from?'

Talkin' Union

Introductions made, the conversation turned to why I was in Minneapolis. My new-found friends were astounded that I had flown from Toronto to be part of a series of events commemorating the 1934 Teamsters' strikes.



Commemoration 2014 Poster, Remember 1934 committee

These class struggles were momentous battles. Workers and their 'special deputy' opponents died in picket line confrontations. The conflict raged over collective bargaining rights for coal heavers, market produce haulers, and truck drivers. When I told the group lining up for breakfast that the top wage demanded by this motley crew was less than 50 cents an hour, it was all news to them.

As I explained that the three strikes waged between February and August in 1934 were part of a nation-wide class upheaval that brought workers out of the doldrums of the Great Depression and into new forms of unionism that organized the unorganized and defeated die-hard anti-labor employers, they were surprised. 'In Minneapolis', they seemed to shrug, 'who knew?'

Elaborating on all of this, I recounted how the Teamsters had grown locally from a union with no more than 175 members in 1933 to a vibrant presence in Minneapolis, 7,000 strong. Once an employer-dominated 'open shop town', Minneapolis was transformed. It became a 'union city'. I explained how this breakthrough then exploded into an eleven-state over-the-road teamster organizing drive that quadrupled the national membership of the International Brotherhood, pushing it past the 500,000 mark by 1940.

The Hoffa Hangover

Jimmy Hoffa, before he was gangstered-up, learned how to organize truckers in this late 1930s mobilization, spearheaded out of the Minnesota metropole. 'Minneapolis Teamsters,' my morning conversationalists replied in wonder. 'Really! They did this?' To them, teamsters were a stereotype, a muscle-shirt wearing contingent of independent-contract drivers, under the tutelage of a racketeering officialdom.

And this clearly has had its local story-line.

As late as 2012, Local 120 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), serving Minneapolis and adjacent centers and the direct descendant of the union that waged the strikes of 1934, was rocked with a corruption scandal. A report undertaken by a Teamster union review board revealed that a father-son Secretary-Treasurer/President duo had diverted hundreds of thousands of dollars of membership funds into a variety of construction, enterprise, sporting ticket, and other schemes that resulted in the local being put under trusteeship by IBT union boss, James Hoffa, Jr., not to be confused with this father Jimmy.

Hoffa Sr., after presiding over the IBT from the late 1950s, was convicted on jury tampering, attempted bribery, and fraud charges in the early 1960s. Sentenced to 13 years in prison, Hoffa delayed the inevitable with appeal after appeal. Eventually he went to jail. Incarcerated for less than one-third of his time, Hoffa was pardoned by Richard Nixon in 1971. He then disappeared in 1975, widely thought to have been murdered by the mob in Detroit.

Jimmy Hoffa, then, consolidated a view of the Teamsters as corrupt that was, in places like Minneapolis, confirmed by modern developments. One Local 120 critic voiced disgust at the 2012 revelations, claiming that the union had become little more than 'a good-old-boys club.' He reported that it was impossible to get rid of those embezzling union funds and engaging in all manner of fraudulent schemes, including a union-run, money-losing bar in Fargo, North Dakota. That venture managed to see $200,000 worth of liquor and beer go missing.

Fargo, I thought when I became aware of this sordid bit of recent Minneapolis Teamster history – Joel and Ethan Coen clearly miscast the players in their dark comedy about murder, used car dealerships, and development schemes. They should have set the stage with Local 120 characters and their tavern-tampering ways.

A Revolutionary Leadership and its Day in (Bourgeois/Kangaroo) Court

Socialist Workers Party leaders, l to r, James P. Cannon, Carl Skoglund, Vincent Raymond Dunne, Arne Swabeck, 1950s. Bryan Palmer Collection, courtesy of Jean Tussey.

The leaders of these 1934 Minneapolis strikes were an entirely different breed. They adhered to the views of Leon Trotsky, and were organized in a group known as the Communist League of America (CLA) that would later develop into the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Barely half-a-dozen of these revolutionary Trotskyists had been agitating in the coal yards and among truckers since the late 1920s, and their patient efforts led to the victory of the 1934 strikes.

So successful were these teamster leaders that the state, the employers, the IBT bureaucracy (with Jimmy Hoffa as its head thug), and even the Communist Party colluded in World War II to displace and defeat them. The low point of this vendetta: two show trials of the early 1940s that saw the Minneapolis revolutionary teamsters and other genuine workers' leaders convicted on trumped-up treason charges. Twenty-nine individuals were hauled into court, 18 of them railroaded to jail.

The real crime of the Trotskyists and teamster leaders was that they created strikingly effective ways of confronting employers and built new and democratic forms of mass unionism that challenged the status quo on all kinds of levels. They battled the trucking bosses with panache.

Organizing Workers to Win

New strike tactics such as the flying pickets that roved Minneapolis streets in 1934, chasing down scab trucks, were devised and implemented. Teamster leaders developed an extensive 'intelligence network', and were well informed by secretaries working for various enterprises of what the trucking magnates were preparing to do next. To get its message out to thousands of members, scattered throughout Minneapolis, the union took to the skies and the streets, enlisting an airplane and a squad of teenaged motorcyclists.

Strike Leader, Vincent Raymond Dunne. Bryan Palmer Collection, courtesy of Jean Tussey.

Strikes were planned down to the last detail. A massive union headquarters was staffed with dispatchers, a commissary was outfitted, and a make-shift hospital to care for the wounded was put in place. Refusing to be hoodwinked by the tired leadership of the IBT, these workers' leaders instead involved the rank-and-file in strike committees 100-strong, drew the unemployed to work with the union, and organized a women's auxiliary that attracted wives and daughters, mothers and aunts, to the necessity of building unionism.

Winning truckers and others in the transportation industry to militant activism, these leaders championed open discussions in regularly-convened mass meetings, favoring public votes of all union members rather than secret ballots. When they actually secured paid union positions after their 1934 strike victories, the revolutionary Trotskyists guiding the

teamsters' insurgency instituted salary scales for themselves insuring that union officials were paid no more than those working in the industry.

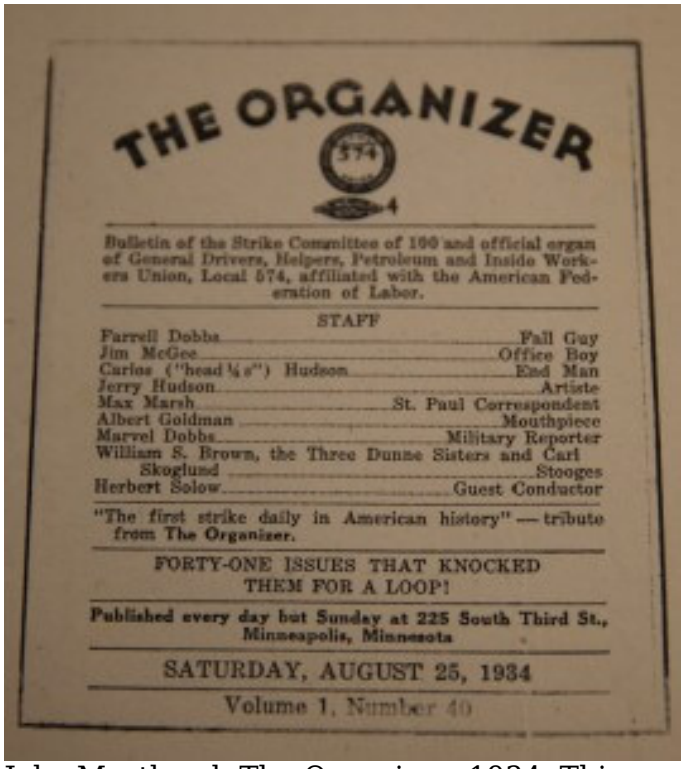
These revolutionaries also gained the confidence and respect of laboring men and women by helping their working-class confreres in time of need. They also suffered firings, beatings, and jailings. Encouraging workers to think independently, in the midst of the strikes of 1934 they put out a daily newspaper, The Organizer. This strike bulletin used innovative means, among them satire and humor, to convince laborers that it was necessary to fight for their rights.

Class War Warriors and the Red Scare

In the late 1930s, fascists threatened to organize in Minneapolis, realizing that the victories achieved in the 1934 strikes needed to be turned back if their reactionary cause was to succeed. Known as the Silver Shirts, these reacationaries talked of infiltrating the unions, making them nurseries of recruitment to right-wing thought, cultivating opposition to class-based understandings of the social order. They propagated a pernicious racism and anti-Semitism.

Trotskyists immediately saw the danger this posed. They formed an armed contingent of workers known as the Union Defense Guard. Its 'commander' was Ray Rainbolt, a Sioux Nation trucker and SWP member. He drilled the rifle-bearing workers and railed against the Silver Shirts and their project. Preparedness was the watchword among these revolutionaries. But workers arming themselves didn't curry favor with the Justice Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, both of which were involved in the later legal onslaught against the Minneapolis teamsters.

Nor did the affront of labor effectively standing up against its class adversaries win the Minneapolis teamsters acclaim locally, at least as far as conventional authority was concerned. The General Drivers Union, known as Local 574, and its Trotskyist leadership were vilified in the mainstream newspapers. Anti-communism blanketed Minneapolis in 1934 like a dense fog; you could cut it with a dull bourgeois blade. Demanding 42-and-a-half cents an hour for the drivers and insisting on the right of those handling crates of vegetables in the market to join the union were the thin edge of a wedge ostensibly opening the door to a Soviet Minneapolis. Or so the Citizen's Alliance, the employers' voice in the strikes, claimed.



THE ORGANIZER

574

Bulletin of the Strike Committee of 100 and official organ of General Drivers, Helpers, Petroleum and Inside Workers Union, Local 574, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor.

STAFF

Farrell Dobbs ..... Fall Guy
Jim McGee ..... Office Boy
Carlos ("head ¼ s") Hudson ..... End Man
Jerry Hudson ..... Artiste
Max Marsh ..... St. Paul Correspondent
Albert Goldman ..... Mouthpiece
Marvel Dobbs ..... Military Reporter
William S. Brown, the Three Dunne Sisters and Carl Skoglund ..... Stooges
Herbert Solow ..... Guest Conductor

"The first strike daily in American history" — tribute from The Organizer.

FORTY-ONE ISSUES THAT KNOCKED THEM FOR A LOOP!

Published every day but Sunday at 225 South Third St., Minneapolis, Minnesota

SATURDAY, AUGUST 25, 1934

Volume 1, Number 40

Joke Masthead, The Organizer, 1934. This was never published, but was a humorous self-depiction of the staff the newspaper.

The Organizer countered, 'They accuse us in this local of being un-American but how's this for some real Am. Members: Happy Holstein, Chippewa; Ray Rainbolt, Sioux; Doc Tollotson, Chippewa; Bill Bolt, Chippewa; Bill Rogers, Chippewa; Joe Belanger, Chippewa." The Red Scare was no doubt driven by the employers and their political and socio-cultural allies, but conservative laborites also contributed. One Native American wrote as 'A member of 574, not a Communist, but a Chippewa Indian and a real American.' He protested the ways in which the ossified trade union tops occupying the plush office seats at the headquarters of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters red-baited the Minneapolis strike leadership. These underhanded attacks did the bosses' bidding, adding 'fuel to the fire' of the employer association's anti-communism.

Unions as History

As it turns out, my breakfast partners to be were educators in the public school system. They did not much like their teachers' federations. 'Hadn't unions become too big and powerful and reactionary?' asked my chatty mates. 'Hadn't labour organizations outlived their usefulness?' Trade unions, in the vernacular of these educational workers, 'were

history'.

This is not an unusual view. And it contains a small grain of truth. Many workers will indeed speak of their union as a distant and ossified structure. But I argued with these teachers that if unions did often function in bureaucratic ways, they were hardly unduly powerful in their dealings with the employers and the state. On the contrary, they were weakened bodies, and had long been on the skids. They needed to be rebuilt, and in this rejuvenation their democratic promise and potential was necessarily going to be integral to the labor movement's revitalization.

Evidence of union decline is unambiguous. The percentage of the workforce organized in United States unions was roughly 33 percent in 1945, had declined to 24 percent by the end of the 1970s, and now stands at little more than ten percent. Moreover, this union density is regionally skewed. Fully 4.4 million of the total 14.5 million union members in the United States live in two states, California and New York, a whopping 21 percent. Try cracking a union in North Carolina or Arkansas. If we factor out public sector workers such as teachers and government employees, whose high union densities of 35 percent are a product of 1960s organizational breakthroughs in these areas, the health of the trade union movement looks even worse. The precipitous decline of unions in the private sector – where the mass production labor gains of the 1930s and 1940s were registered – is astounding. Today, less than seven percent of American workers who toil in these traditional blue collar occupations are union members. Trade unionism is not exactly trending in the right direction.

'What will the United States look like without unions?' I asked Al's customers. I reminded them of what the labor movement had historically accomplished. Unions were vital forces in securing working people the basic entitlements that now mean so much to ordinary Americans: the eight-hour day; the weekend; a living wage; paid holiday time; some essential protection from arbitrary dismissal or humiliating denigration. As jaundiced as they had come to be about unions as they are in our times, the men I talked to outside of and then inside of Al's Breakfast knew this. They agreed that a United States without unions would be a country in which working people were acutely disadvantaged. Our dialogue seemed to move them out of their present discontents and uncovered more in the way of positive appreciations of the value of labor organization. These men knew, intuitively, that without the protections of trade unionism they and countless others were going to suffer.

What they did not know is the history of the Teamster insurgency in Minneapolis in 1934, arguably a key struggle that made so much of trade unionism's mid-century advance possible, not only in one city in one particularly difficult time, the years of the Great Depression, but in wider national circles. What happened in Minneapolis in 1934 helped

galvanize workers to fight back.

It influenced national figures like United Mine Workers leader, John L. Lewis, to see that the moribund unionism of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), in which leaders like IBT strongman Daniel Tobin were ensconced, needed to be revitalized in what would come to be known as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The CIO mass production unionism that repudiated the narrow, craft-organized, business unionism of the AFL, threatened, for a brief time, to become a social mass production unionism that connected up with other fights for civil rights, women's rights, and various other social justice causes. Born of 'red' leaderships like those active in Minneapolis and elsewhere, and driven by rank-and-file militancy, this reinvigorated mass unionism put the movement back in labor's mobilizations.

Too often this process is seen as somehow a product of Lewis himself, and his ostensibly far-seeing vision of a new unionism. In fact, Lewis looked to Minneapolis. As one of his early biographers, Saul Alinsky, wrote in 1947, when "Blood ran in [the streets of] Minneapolis," it got the burly, idiosyncratic head of the miners' union to sit up and take notice.

Commemorating Workers' Struggle: Remember 1934

I was in Minneapolis in mid-July because I had recently authored a book on these local strikes and their Trotskyist leadership: Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934. Minneapolis has a dedicated crew of individuals who, on particular anniversaries, hold high the banner of these exemplary strikes. They call themselves the Remember 1934 committee. One of their current tasks is to raise funds for a plaque to be placed in the old Warehouse District where two workers, Teamster rank-and-file member Henry Ness and unemployed worker John Bellor, died in a viciously one-sided, strike-related battle with police on 'Bloody Friday', 20 July 1934. This being the 80th anniversary of the strikes, the 1934 committee and a number of Minneapolis unions organized an impressive series of events.

I was honored to participate in the proceedings, which included a public lecture on my book at the Central Library; a film night featuring video and newsreel clips from a number of 1934 strikes, including those of Minneapolis, sponsored by American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees Local 3800; a Teamsters Local 120 picnic and rally, with speakers like Minnesota's populist Senator, Al Franken; a march to where many of the pitched street battles of the 1934 conflict took place; the laying of a union wreath where an unarmed Henry Ness was viciously murdered by police; a six-hour street festival, involving hip-hop artists, street art exhibits, Aztec dancers, union and other speakers; a Sunday picnic

paying tribute to the descendants of the strikers, many of whom remain committed unionists, activists, and socialists; and a book launch and talk at a local institution of the left, MayDay Books, focusing on Revolutionary Teamsters.

These events heralded suggestions of fresh beginnings amidst recollections of old commitments.

Police and Striker Injured in Market District Picket Confrontation, 21 May 1934, Bryan Palmer Collection

In the past, for instance, few descendants seemed to come forward and participate in efforts to Remember 1934. At this year's 80th anniversary celebrations, however, more relatives of the strikers came out of the woodwork. They recalled, often quite movingly, the ways their kinfolk's lives were forever altered by the experience of fighting to build unionism in Minneapolis.

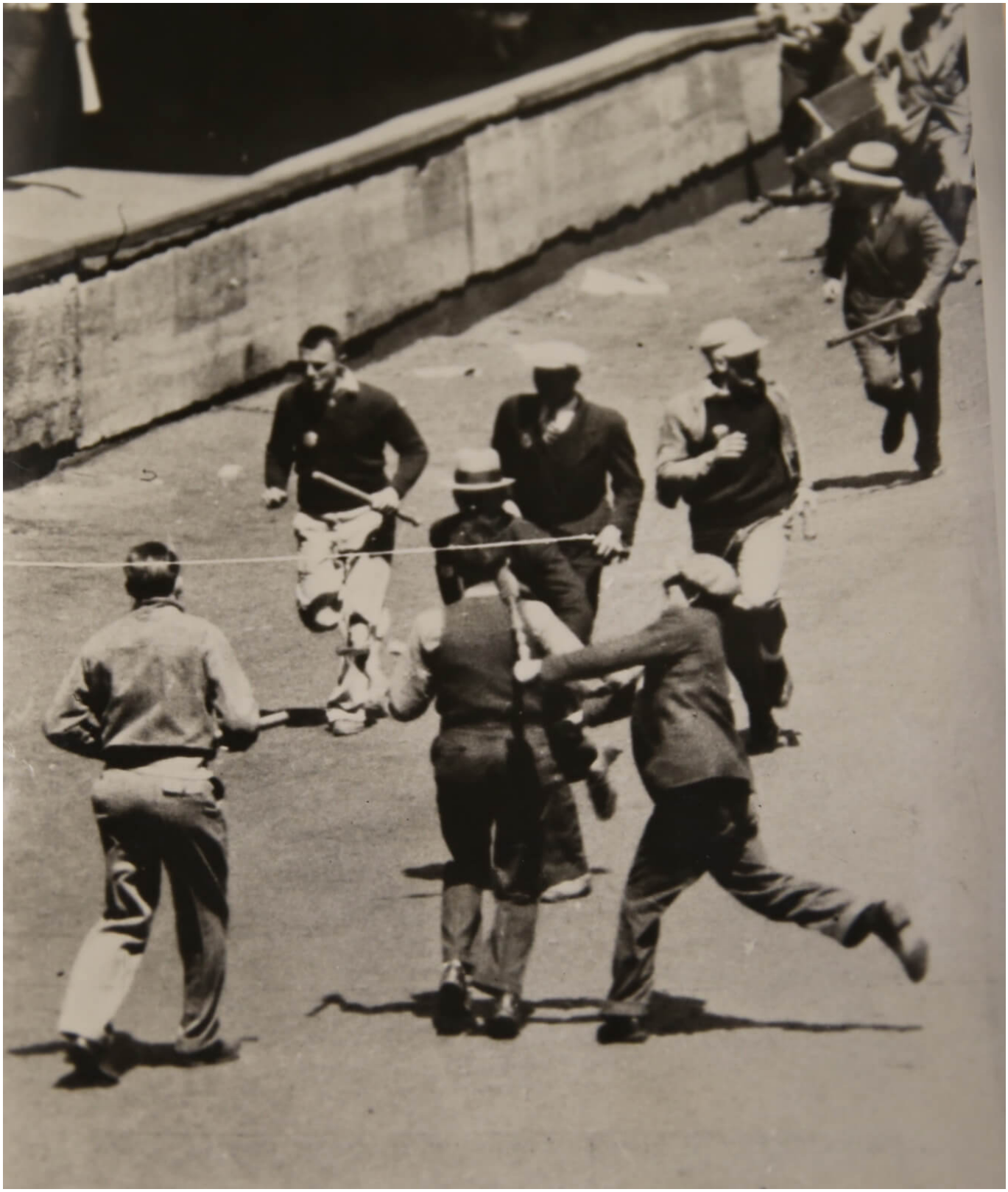
Within Local 120, which has in the past eschewed a direct involvement in the Remember 1934 events, this is the first time that the official Teamsters union, as opposed to a reform current within it, Teamsters for a Democratic Union, has participated in the commemorations with unambiguous enthusiasm. In effect, 2014 marked a change in the IBT's willingness to 'own' its history. There was even mention of 'Trotskyist communist' leadership in one of the speeches at the Local 120 picnic.

Too much cannot be made of such developments. They may nonetheless suggest, as do a host of other happenings, from the Occupy movement to the protests in Wisconsin against state attacks on trade unionism to the victories around the $15 minimum wage in Seattle and elsewhere to the impressive recent fight of Chicago's teachers, that the anti-union tide that has threatened to engulf American labor is now meeting resistance.

Dialectics of Possibility

The Teamsters' strikes of 1934 matter today because they remind us that, however bad the situation and whatever the power of those opposing change, victories can indeed be won.

One of the tangible hurdles that must be overcome if unions are to once again be remade as fighting agencies of the popular will is precisely the inertia and defeatism that suggests that they cannot, in the current climate, realize the potential that has always animated the labor movement. After all, unionism originated in and has long been inspired by the slogan, 'An injury to one, is an injury to all.' That brief admonition broadens understandings of what struggles can and should be about.



Battle of Deputies Run, 22 May 1934

What is needed within unions and other social movements in our times is the kind of leadership that can, in the spirit of 1934, demand, as was often said in periods of upheaval like 1968, the seemingly impossible. But this must be done in ways that understand what can be accomplished in a particular context. A balance must be struck between what might realistically be squeezed out of the actualities of the moment, without capitulating to the sorry ideological denials of possibility characteristic of any particular time.

This capacity to maximize what could be secured through struggle in 1934, rather than succumbing to the defeatism all around them, was what distinguished the revolutionary Trotskyists in the Minneapolis trucking industry from the IBT bureaucratic union officialdom.

If we compare the circumstances that a handful of these radicals faced in the coal yards of Minneapolis in the early 1930s, with what we confront today, it is impossible not to conclude that things looked worse, not better, in those Great Depression years. The working class of Minneapolis won in 1934 because it had a leadership to guide it and a militant willingness to fight. This can happen again, not only in Minneapolis, but throughout the capitalist economies of our time, which are overripe for popular insurgencies.

Unionism Today and the Denial of Possibility

Three claims are often currently made denying the possibility of union revival. It is instructive to look at these assertions and compare them to the situation Minneapolis militants faced in 1934:

- When the economy is in terrible shape, as it is now, the times prohibit overt class struggles and demand concessions and a holding back on demands.
- In the past, workers were able to build solidarity and collective ways of resisting because their circumstances were different than those prevailing today. Class may well have been a potent force for social change in earlier periods, but this is not the case now. People see their circumstances from the vantage point of individual rather than collective concerns. Mobilizations like that of Minneapolis in 1934 are now impossible.
- Unions are outmoded institutions. They are top-heavy with bureaucracy and are removed from their dues-paying memberships. Labor organizations thus have no relevance in progressive, contemporary social struggles.

A lot of this was on order at Al's Breakfast. But Trotskyists in Minneapolis answered these denials of possibility.

Their economic prospects, in 1933-1934, looked no better and probably a lot worse, than anything recent generations of workers have faced.

To be sure, the claims that workers today are less likely to struggle in class and collective ways than their counterparts in the past may seem self-evident. No doubt the fragmentation of working-class community life has increased over time, and the lure of consumer capitalism is more powerful now than it was decades ago. There are state institutions, like the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), that exercise a decisive and detrimental sway over laboring men and women in ways that were only weakly established in the 1930s. There is no doubt that the legalistic snare in which unions now seemed trapped is an impediment to class struggle mobilization.

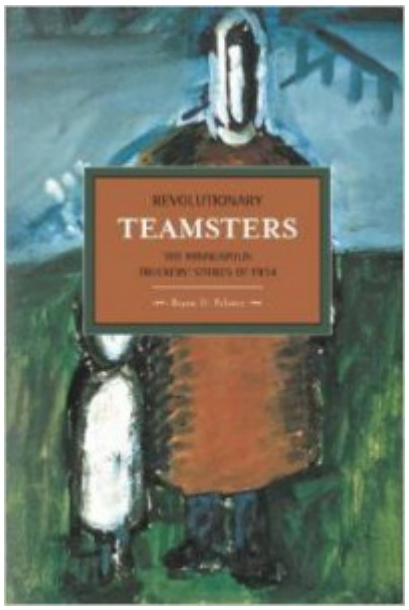
Yet as the Minneapolis teamster leaders showed in their opposition to Franklin D. Roosevelt's original NLRB, the corps of mediators sent to defuse the volatile situation in Minneapolis, and the smooth talking Farmer-Labor Party state governor, Floyd Olson, it is possible to beat back the state's hegemonic hold over the working class. The claims of conventional wisdoms suffocating popular insurgency's potent potential can be refused; the barriers erected against the active agency of workers by contemporary labor relations and their institutions of industrial legality can be transcended.

So, too, can the seemingly insuperable divisions of working-class life in the modern era. While racism and all manner of chauvinisms have existed throughout history and while they exercise their divisiveness within today's working class, it is nevertheless the case that civil rights struggles, feminism, LBGTQ mobilizations, and other social movements, including trade unionism, have set the stage for a wider sense of human solidarity than has ever before been imaginable. Finally, precisely because capitalism has been in a state of crisis management since the mid-1970s, its capacity to lure the oppressed and exploited into its ideological lair has weakened considerably in recent times. Many people aren't 'buying' it anymore. For all of the problems inherent in the Occupy Movement, its slogan of 'Down with the 1%, Up with the 99%' articulated an undeniable and growing repudiation of capitalism's fundamental inequalities, highlighting the salience of class solidarity.

Finally, to those arguing that unions are bureaucratic beasts whose time has passed, the Minneapolis teamsters strikes of 1934 show precisely how an ossified officialdom can be swept aside in a moment of class upheaval. In the process, trade unionism can be revived.

The Left Today and the Denial of Possibility

There is also a second set of denials that also inhibit active change. They relate to the revolutionary left.



Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934 by Bryan D. Palmer

The primary lesson of Minneapolis is that the leadership that achieved the victory of 1934 came from this revolutionary left. There would have been no victories in Minneapolis in the mid-1930s if there had not been a Communist League of America leadership, established in New York, with a trade union fraction working diligently on the ground in a distant Minnesota city.

What these revolutionaries brought to trade unionism from outside of its experiences was decisively important. So, too, was the fact that these revolutionaries were embedded within the trucking industry and were well-known, and respected, among the workers of Minneapolis. The particularities of place mattered, but so too did general principles learned in various schools of hard knocks, and consolidated over the course of years of revolutionary thought and practice. When the situation exploded in all-out class war, the local leadership could rely on the advice, guidance, and skills of their 'party-like' formation and its comrades, as well as the support, resolve, energy, and militancy of rank-and-file workers in Minneapolis, both in the trucking sector and outside of it.

If we are to witness events the like of Minneapolis 1934 again, we obviously need, not only new unions, but a new, and revived, revolutionary left.

Yet the ideological commonsense of our current times proclaims the revolutionary left dead and buried. It does so in ways that are, again, usefully compared to the 1934 Minneapolis struggles:

- With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, capitalist commentators proclaimed 'the end of history'. This grandiose posture was premised on the view that with the implosion of actually existing socialism in its Stalinist variant, capitalism was triumphant, ending a contest pitting the free-world colossus (headed by the US in the West) against the so-called totalitarian planned economies.
- Equating the entirety of the socialist project with Soviet Stalinism and its modern offshoots, from China to Cuba, this view of the 1945-1990 world concluded that a revolutionary challenge to capitalism had, finally, been vanquished. Capitalism's contest with socialism was declared decisively over.
- With the revolutionary left forever dispensed with, the politics of our times are confined to a new, and lesser, opposition. The only political contest involves progressive reform within capitalism, of the social democratic or liberal kind, versus the maintenance of a civil society prostrate before the hegemony of the market, or neoliberalism.

The Minneapolis truckers' insurgency and its leadership made it abundantly clear that Stalinism need not encompass the entirety of the revolutionary left. The Trotskyists who guided the 1934 teamster upheaval understood how the Communist Party of this era had abandoned its revolutionary origins and was on a slow, but inevitable, road to the implosion of 1989. They offered workers and their allies an alternative.

That alternative, moreover, kept the promise of revolutionary socialism alive precisely because it refused to collapse all struggle into the small, complacent, container of progressive, liberal, reform. A politics of the left that became nothing more than the attempt to insure that the lesser of many evils triumphed, necessitating the embrace of many pernicious illusions, was anathema to the revolutionary leadership of the Teamster rebellion. They would no more have regarded Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Governor Olson as an ally than should today's left look to someone far less radical, Barrack Obama, as anything approximating an answer to the untold grievances of the dispossessed.

If the Trotskyist teamsters were not fighting directly for Revolution in 1934, and they were

not, their militant refusal to succumb to the many temptations on offer by those whose purpose it was to limit unionism to nothing more than an appendage to capitalism, built important bridges to revolutionary possibility. And that is exactly why that revolutionary leadership and those bridges had to be attacked by bourgeois power and its props within the working class, under the guise of World War II-fomented treason charges.

What the Minneapolis Trotskyists tell us is that principle and a vision of what can be achieved by militant actions and resolve, whatever the circumstances, do matter. They did not barter away their critical senses in a cat-and-mouse game of setting their sights on one main enemy and toying with ways of making their struggle more palatable to others, with whom they had fundamental disagreements. They fought employers and IBT bureaucrats; Stalinist slander and social democratic carrots of enticement; labor boards, courts, and mediators; the pulpit, police and provocateurs. This audacity goes a long way toward explaining just how they won, when so many other working-class struggles came up short.

Victories can be achieved, then, even in the worst of times. Even in our times. They will not, however, be secured by drinking the hemlock of conciliation, compromising everything in order to achieve a small, and always vulnerable, corner of what is needed. Reality must be faced squarely; capitulation can never be countenanced. We need to remember 1934 because, 80 years later, it still lives for us as a pathway to possibility.

Dining Out as It Has Been and as It Might Be

Al’s Breakfast has a long row of yellow ticket books. They are thrown into rectangular alphabetically-ordered bins that run much of the length of the narrow service area in which cooks and servers scurry back and forth. Each booklet has a name boldly marked on its outside.

I asked the waitress what they were. ‘Prepaid breakfasts,’ she replied, barely stopping to answer as she walked off briskly to pick-up and drop off another order. Apparently the practice began in the 1950s: railroad workers, paid once a month, would deposit a portion of their wages with Al so they would be assured of eating at the end of the month when their cash reserves would likely be low. Not quite ‘From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs’. But something.

In 1934, when they were on strike, teamsters dined at their massive union hall. This was a place that proclaimed the collective power of the working class. More than a building, it was an edifice that represented a way of life. Workers’ meals were not prepaid, at least not in terms of the cash that oils the wheels of the marketplace. Rather, it was the collective being

of class mobilization that literally put food on the workers' communal tables in 1934, and that ordered concerns of health and well-being. Sustenance in the midst of struggle was provided by the General Drivers' Union. Local 574's commissary was staffed by women's auxiliary members; its hospital was run by volunteer doctors and nurses.

Discussions took place about how to maximize nutrition in the meals served, which were prepared by strike supporters, many of the ingredients provided by local farmers who sided with the workers in their battles.

After a full day of picket duty, a striking worker might well have sat down to a plate of roast chicken, mashed potatoes, and fresh vegetables. This was likely to be followed by conversation and discussion with fellow unionists, perhaps even an address by one of the strike leaders or a report from the Strike Committee of 100. To cap off the evening, this worker likely took time to do a reading of the day's issue of The Organizer. Food for thought.

Bryan D. Palmer is the author of *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014) and a past editor of the Canadian journal, *Labour/Le Travail*. He is the Canada Research Chair, Canadian Studies Department, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario.

Author

- Bryan Palmer

