

Political Context of the IBT Contract Fight

The 1976 bargaining round occurs at a peculiar moment in the unfolding crisis of capitalism. It is a moment that offers opportunities to the workers and bosses alike. For most industries profits are up and a recovery of perhaps a year and a half or more is in progress. For the workers, still burning from inflation and unemployment, it offers the opportunity to catch up and maybe get a little ahead before the next depression. For the workers it may be the last chance for a long time.

For the bosses it is also a time to catch up and get ahead. If high profits can be maintained, investment and rationalization, they hope, can underwrite a prolonged boom. This means that most industries will be trying to cut labor costs, speed up work, eliminate jobs. There is every indication that the employers will not only resist significant settlements in 1976, but they will have demands of their own.

For the first time in years, the rubber settlement promises a fairly serious confrontation between the employers and the union. There are even signs that the traditionally polite relationship between the UAW and the big three may be fraying at the edges.

In the MFA negotiations the bosses are taking a hard line for the first time in years. It is clear they want to rationalize their industry. Working conditions and health and safety standards are the price the workers are being asked to pay for high profits in trucking. (The latest word on the IBT talks is that they are suspended until March 15 or 16. The employers seem to be stonewalling it on the issue of a Wednesday/Sunday work week which would mean more flexible--for them--bidding and elimination of premium pay for weekends and the issue of 48 hour layovers for road drivers which are guaranteed in some supplements.) The MFA will set the pattern for all subsequent contracts. Not only will it set wages, but even more important, it will determine to some extent how bold and aggressive other employers will be. If the mighty IBT can be forced to its knees, other employers will be inspired to do the same.

In 1976 the union leaders and rank and file are not the only actors in the field. The employers are no longer taking their traditionally passive and resistive role. They are to a greater extent than usual the aggressor. This alters the situation in which the main potential pressure on the union leadership is the rank and file. Today the union leadership is caught between two forces--the employers and the rank and file.

For the IBT this pattern of employer aggression has already been set by UPS. UPS has been able to consistently route the union over the past few years. But it has been able to do so because it stood in a relationship that was the reverse of the traditional IBT-employer pattern. In freight and elsewhere, the IBT has been the big union dealing with a large number of relatively small employers. That was certainly the case when freight was organized and major regional contracts imposed on the employers. UPS, on the other hand, is a large national corporation that has had to face only regional or local unions. Its strategy was to pick off the weak areas and move on. It worked.

No doubt the freight bosses have been inspired by UPS's successes. While they cannot imitate the UPS strategy, they have decided to face the IBT with a national assault. Their demands would move freight some ways towards the UPS relationship to labor. If the freight bosses make any sort of headway in this respect, UPS will, of course, be even more bold than usual in its demands in the contract expiring just after the MFA. It is not just the wage pattern that links the MFA and UPS contracts. It is the level of aggression by the employers. The fights

in freight and UPS are intimately linked for both the bosses and the workers.

The employers offensive in trucking and its pattern tells us much about what TDC and UPSurge must become in the next few weeks. The obstinance of the freight employers creates a situation we did not expect. The employers seem to have caught the IBT leadership off balance causing both some re-shuffling at the top and a change in the previous no strike position. No doubt Fitz and friends are no more enthusiastic about a strike than before, but now they are forced to "leak" some strike talk. While it is doubtful that Fitz will call or lead a strike on his own initiative, it cannot be ruled out that the employers may provoke one. It cannot even be excluded that the employers may want to provoke a strike in the hopes that it will shake up the union in one way or another. Fitz, for his part in such a situation, may tolerate disorganized strikes or selective strikes in the hopes it will let off steam or demoralize the ranks.

TDC and UPSurge have said that to make a breakthrough in their contracts, Teamsters would have to strike. Under the new circumstance the question of a strike becomes even more urgent. First of all, it may be a situation in which a strike is needed--objectively--just to defend existing standards if the employers have really decided to get tough. Under that circumstance, even Fitz might be forced to call some sort of strike--perhaps a selective one. Under somewhat less, but still severe pressure from the employers, Fitz may tolerate a strike. In that circumstance the question of rank and file strike preparations are even more crucial. Even in a situation where Fitz opposes any form of strike, a tough stance by the employers or even lack of significant motion by the union may produce wildcats or at least strike sentiment on a mass scale. Again, rank and file preparation is essential.

TDC and UPSurge, of course, are not just commentators on this shifting situation. The very fact of building interest and pressure around the contracts makes them(us) actors in the field. For Fitz and pals we are at least a big head ache and probably a real pressure on events. (We are also getting rumors out of Chicago from some fairly solid sources that rank and file activity is being taken seriously by the negotiators. The LA office workers petition and TDC were both reported to be of ~~XXXXXXXX~~ active interest to the negotiators on both sides.) A sharp bargaining situation is almost certain to produce massive concern over the contract and probably large scale strike sentiment. TDC and UPSurge are helping to create and organize that sentiment.

At the moment(late February) TDC is at a plateau. Its organization has grown through extension and continues to do so to some degree. In areas where TDC is older, it has tended to decline somewhat. The current situation in TDC is above all the result of the fact that there is not yet massive ~~strikesentiment~~ interest in the contract, much less mass strike sentiment.(Though this situation may change rapidly and there are already signs that it has. Reports from Detroit and LA indicate that shifts of sentiment around the contract and towards a strike are real and growing. People should keep us informed on these shifts because they are hard to gauge accurately nationwide, but are ~~the~~ essential in planning the struggle at this point.) CONVOY, March 13, barn organizing, and the continued message that we are "ready to strike" all point ~~ix~~ to preparations for the last weeks before the contract at which time mass interest should materialize and TDC become a mass movement.

In the situation described above this means whentehr we say it or not, that we are leading and preparing to lead a movement up to the brink of a possible strike situation. Our organizing is a pressure that tends to maximize the possibilities of a strike. As we have said,

the employers may wish to provoke a strike for their own reasons, Fitz may tolerate disorganized--or what he believes to be disorganized--strike sentiment and action, and in fact circumstances we are helping to create may make a strike inevitable.

Under these circumstances, TDC and UPSurge have no choice but to make explicit to the workers we are agitating the need to prepare organizationally, personally, and politically for a strike of one kind or another. We cannot lead people to the brink unprepared. We cannot assume that an organization built with the idea of being a pressure group and not aware of any responsibility for strike preparation can, in fact, carry people through a strike.

At each and every level of TDC and UPSurge organization we must be clear about the purposes of that organization. They can be outlined as follows:

National: 1) To provide political and tactical leadership and direction; i.e., the plan for the contract campaign, the political context in which the contract fight occurs, tactical suggestions, clear statements on what lies ahead including a possible strike.

2) To help local TDC or UPSurge groups get organized.

3) To provide national communications and information through CONVOY, UPSurge, and internal bulletins.

Chapter: 1) Coordinate contract campaign locally, get petitions, collect money, etc.

2) Distribute papers throughout the city, and collect for them.

3) Fund Raise

4) Build March 13

5) Prepare to co-ordinate city wide strike action.

Barn or Hub: 1) Keep workers informed of events and plans.

2) Distribute papers to workers and collect money

3) ~~Collect money~~ Hold meetings

4) Act as a shop floor group, maybe put out a newsletter.

5) Prepare the workers for barn action, picket lines, etc.

Keep in touch with city-wide group, telephone chains, etc.

Every level of TDC and UPSurge has several purposes, but one of them must become strike preparation. Under the different possible circumstances the workers may need to be prepared for defensive actions or to take the initiative. In any case, organizational preparations are essential. How do we do that and what is the timing?

For now, the political motivation for beginning strike preparation ~~are~~ is largely defensive. That is, we know the employers are getting tough; we know there is always the possibility of wildcats; and we know that TDC and UPSurge militants may be victimized. In all cases we need to be ready to act. A disorganized situation like 1970 is the worst possible one. We can avoid it by being prepared.

The first step in strike preparation, whether it is us speaking to TDC activists or them speaking to their fellow workers, is political. We need to warn people of the situation and convince them that like it or not, they had better get organized for April 1 (or May 1 for Central States UPS).

The next steps are those people should be taking anyway. That is, setting up city wide and barn organizations on a more solid basis. This means effective CONVOY and UPSurge distribution. It means having a steering committee that represents the biggest, most important barns, a committee that is motivated by the possibility of a strike and the need for the biggest to take the lead. It means local meetings, after the initial meeting, that are composed of groups from the bigger barns, who in turn represent something back in their barn. The local

meetings should be largely concerned with the business of TDC and UPSurge: paper distribution, fund raising, preparation for March 13, and establishing solid contact with the TDCers or UPSers in each barn or hub. This network of contacts, however, cannot be seen as just a routine thing. There must be a sense of urgency about what is being done. That means, among other things, that the network must be understood to be the co-ordinating mechanism in the event of a strike. It is the network that the local steering committee is plugged into so that it could co-ordinate strike activity.

The next step begins just after the 13th. With two weeks to go those organizational steps needed to pull off a strike, hold one together, and if necessary, end one, must be set up. This means things like phone chains, plans for flying pickets, decisions about which barns to picket first, or how to get help to people forced out on strike by their employers, contingency plans for the various situations, even plans on whether or not, when or how to wildcat. At the national level it means re-gearing the office to become a strike co-ordination center.

It is not the purpose of this document to outline actual preparations. Its purpose is to point out that the situation no longer allows us to be vague on the question of a strike.

The relationship between freight and UPS employers offensive means greater coordination and cooperation between UPSurge and TDC than has been the case. In very practical terms we need to be clear that a strike in freight that lasts any time will bring UPS to a near halt. Feeder drivers will not run if the freight strike is effective and within days, workers in the hubs will be without work. If UPS workers respond passively to this situation they will be cutting their own throats. For one thing, we must realize that if UPSers are forced out of work only three weeks before their own strike, there will be a big dent in strike sentiment, people will be hesitant to go out twice in one month. If on the other hand they are drawn into the strike on the basis of understanding the significance of the freight strike, they may view the freight strike as a rehearsal. What happens is largely up to us.

In this context, the 13th becomes extremely important. Freight/UPS unity is a major theme of the March 13 rallies and can effect people's consciousness about the situation they all face in April. Additionally, the line carried in UPSurge, which will reach the majority of those effected by an April strike is crucial. By the middle of ~~April~~, March, UPSurge will have to begin explaining in some detail what a strike in freight will mean for UPSers and why they should support it.

At this point, there is a good deal of unreality in the views held by a lot of UPSurge and TDC activists. UPSurge people, for example Vince, talk about a UPS strike without mentioning the ~~possibilities~~ possible effects of a freight strike. TDCers often speak about our influence on the situation ~~as~~ as though we were the only force in the field, i.e., we pressure a lot and that moves Fitz. TDCers have not, for the most part, internalized the fact that the employers are out for blood and that a mere pressure group is not enough in this case. We have a responsibility to explain the possibilities and pitfalls in the situation, Part of building a sense of urgency among TDC and UPSurge activists is winning them over to, an understanding of the content of that urgency--above all the employers offensive and the possibility that we face a strike situation for which we are not yet prepared.

Preparation and organization for a strike can turn the situation around. Not only can it beat back the employer attack in the contract talks, but it can turn their retreat into a route. This year the ranks and the bosses are the major actors. We have got to do that ~~effect~~ well.

March 13: In Case of an Early Settlement

While the bargaining situation as we know it would seem to rule out an early settlement, we cannot afford to be caught unprepared.

As it stands now, the line for the March 13 rallies is a warning to the employers and, by implication, the union that the ranks will not stand for a defeat at the hands of the employers attack, will not ratify any agreement that does not move toward the TDC demands, and that the rank and file is prepared to back up this warning.

An announcement by the union of an early settlement, tentative agreement, etc. is certain to confuse a lot of people and make others feel complacent about the 13th itself. For this reason it is crucial that we prepare TDC and UPSurge activists everywhere for this situation: what to do and what to say?

If the 13th rallies continue to carry a general ~~aftermath~~ message after a dramatic change in the situation, they will only contribute to the confusion. As the situation changes the very purpose of the rallies must change. If any kind of tentative settlement is announced we, and all the TDC/UPSurge people must be ready to change the rallies from general warning and pressure actions to KICK OFF RALLIES FOR A CONTRACT REJECTION MOVEMENT.

The calls, press statements, and speeches will all need to be changed, even at the very last minute to tell the world that these mass actions will kick off the most aggressive rejection movement the IBT has ever seen.

The line would have to say, depending on how much we know about the settlement, that we know the employers have been on the offensive and that any early settlement is certain to represent a surrender to their attacks. Even in the face of a decent wage and COLA settlement, with working conditions and other things kept in the dark, we state that we smell a sell-out of our working conditions and safety standards. We are organizing for rejection until we see a genuine progress on all fronts...in writing!

We should be prepared to put all this into literature on a moments notice, so that the rallies can, in fact, be a kick off for a real rejection movement.

Finally, we need to hold firm to a no contract-no work policy. This means only one thing to TDC/UPSurge: unless there is a duly ratified contract, ratified by a majority vote, on April 1, there will be no work. We are still READY TO STRIKE.