

Socialist Strategies in Unions:

Twenty
Years
in
Transport
Workers
Union
Local 100
by Steve Downs



A Solidarity Working Paper



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Socialist Strategies in Transit

MUCH AS THEIR counterparts did in the 1930s and 1940s, a few thousand socialists in the late 1960s and '70s, from a few dozen socialist groups, got working-class jobs in order to organize workers to oppose capitalism, to build their socialist organizations, to connect anti-racist struggles in the community to rebellions in the workplace, and to build a socialist base in the working class.¹ As part of that process, regardless of which group or tendency they belonged to, they had to make a number of critical decisions, starting with — where to work.

They also had to arrive at an overarching strategy for their work in factories, mines, railroads, driving trucks, offices, etc. They had to decide whether to concentrate on work among workers who were already in unions or those not yet unionized. What should their relationship to union officials be? And what about their political work, how would they bring issues from outside the job or union into their time on the job? If they were in unions, should they run for office? Should they seek to build politically broad organizations on the job or focus on building a group in line with the politics of their own socialist group? What attitude should they take toward traditional electoral activity and most unions' support for the Democratic Party? As you would expect, different groups answered these questions differently.

Now, some fifty years later, a new generation of socialists and activists is thinking about where they should work and how they can organize on the job to challenge bosses, strengthen unions, and build a socialist base in the working class. Much has changed in 50 years. Unions have been in decline

and now represent a much smaller percentage of the workforce than they did in the 1970s. Many more of them are in the public sector. The steel mills and auto plants that attracted radicals 50 years ago employ far fewer workers, while hospitals and logistics employ many more.

There are fewer socialist groups taking on the challenge of building a working-class socialist organization. But one that is, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), is much larger, with greater resources, than any of the groups that “industrialized” in the 1960s and '70s. While many of the groups that carried out a “turn to industry” in the '70s no longer exist, the questions they had to answer as they organized and agitated; as they worked overtime; as they became parts of their new communities of work, have to be asked and answered anew. The strategies of those groups remain relevant and are part of the current discussion of how to answer those questions.

Hopefully, taking a deep look at the perspectives of the socialists who got jobs working on NYC's subways and buses in the 1980s will be useful to those who are trying to organize for democracy and justice on the job, and for a socialist society, in the 2020s.

Getting Jobs In Transit

For many socialist groups in NYC, the answer to the question, “where do we want our supporters to work?” was “transit.”² By the mid-1980s, over a dozen different groups had supporters in NYC's public transit system. Their work provides an unusual opportunity to compare the choices they

1. For more on the “turn to industry,” see *Turn to the Working Class: The New Left, Black Liberation, and the U.S. Labor Movement (1967-1981)* by Kieran Walsh Taylor. Unpublished dissertation, 2007, University of North Carolina. See Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism On-Line (EROL), <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/kerry-t.pdf>

2. For reasons dating back at least to the Red Scare of the 1940s, some socialists refer to themselves as “supporters” rather than “members” of their group. I'll be referring to everyone who identified with and supported any of the specific left-wing organizations mentioned here (whether they called themselves members or supporters) as a supporter. With the exception of a few individuals who were very public about their connections to one or another socialist group, I will not identify the supporters of specific groups by name. One exception is myself. I was a member of Workers Power, and then Solidarity, throughout the period discussed here.

made while doing that work and the impact their supporters had. This article will examine the decisions made during three critical periods: 1) the mid-1980s, in the wake of the 1980 transit strike; 2) a pivotal contract fight beginning in 1990; and 3) the few years beginning in 1999 that included another key contract fight and the victory of a reform slate in the union's election.

In the 1980s, NYC's public transportation system was actually provided by several distinct entities — the NYC Transit Authority (NYCTA), the Manhattan and the Bronx Surface Operating Authority (MaBSTOA), and private bus companies that provided local bus service in Queens and express bus service into Manhattan.

Subway and bus workers are a large blue-collar workforce. The majority of the NYCTA hourly workforce in the 1980s was composed of Black and Puerto Rican workers. In MaBSTOA and the private lines, the majority were white, although that was changing. The jobs at the NYCTA were civil service, with hiring determined by taking a test. (Doing well on tests was a skill many of the former college students who "industrialized" brought with them).

The workforces of all three were (and are) strategically important to NY's economy. And the workers were represented by Transport Workers Union Local 100, an old-line CIO union with a history of militant actions — sometimes sanctioned by the union leadership, other times not.³

Transit in the early '80s was a particular draw for many socialists because the rank-and-file upsurge that had inspired many to get jobs in industry had petered out in the face of back-to-back

recessions in the 1970s. Many leftists lost their jobs as auto plants and steel mills closed. Others found that their co-workers were less willing to take chances when fighting against managements' demands for givebacks for fear of losing their jobs. And then Reagan broke the PATCO strike — signaling open season on unions and their contracts. However, despite the decline in militancy in much of the country, it seemed that transit workers hadn't gotten the memo.

They fought back against the cuts management tried to impose in the course of NYC's fiscal crisis in the mid-70s. They built opposition caucuses that were especially strong among subway workers. By early 1980, a bare majority on the Local's executive board supported the opposition.⁴ When, in April 1980, the executive board narrowly rejected a proposed contract recommended by the union president, John Lawe, TWU 100 was on strike.

That strike, which lasted 11 days, was significant for many reasons. First — and most important — it happened. This was a strike against austerity in the financial and media center of the country. It took place against the wishes of the union's president and was driven by rank and file workers angry about the cuts they had been forced to accept over the previous several years.

By most measures, the strike was a success. Not only were NYC's subways and buses shut down, but the final agreement produced a higher raise than Lawe had been willing to accept and the defeat of many of management's demands for givebacks from the union.⁵

However, despite these gains in the contract, many transit workers felt they had lost. Strikes by public employees are illegal in New York. The

3. The New York City Transit Authority — the TA — operates the city's subway, bus routes in Brooklyn, Staten Island, and parts of Queens and Manhattan. TA workers are public employees covered by civil service. Buses in the Bronx and much of Manhattan are operated by the Manhattan and Bronx Surface Operating Authority (MaBSTOA or the OA). Most of the hourly workers at the TA and all of them at MaBSTOA are represented by TWU 100. MaBSTOA was formed when the city took over several private bus lines following a strike in 1962. It was a key base of support for the union leadership and, prior to 2000, most of Local 100's presidents came from MaBSTOA or the private bus lines that preceded it. Following the 2005 transit strike, the private bus lines in Queens, as well as express bus service from Westchester into Manhattan which had been contracted to a private bus company, were taken over by the state and are now operated by MTA Bus. Workers at MaBSTOA and MTA Bus are public employees but not covered by civil service. The TA also operates bus service on Staten Island. Those workers, along with those in two depots in Queens, are public employees covered by civil service, but they are represented by two locals of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), not the TWU.

4. Two opposition slates won 19 of 45 seats on the Board in 1979. Another opponent of the leadership ran and won as an independent. Another won a vacancy election in early 1980. Then, two Board members who had run with the incumbents switched their support to the opposition. This gave the opposition a 23 to 22 edge.

5. When the tentative agreement was presented to the Executive Board, one of the members who had been elected with Lawe's opponents and who had voted against the earlier agreement was not at the meeting because he was on National Guard service. When the vote on accepting this new agreement was a tie, Lawe then left the meeting room, went to the press who were waiting to learn whether the strike was over, and declared that the Board was recommending that the membership accept the agreement. In the meantime, the members would return to work. This led to allegations that Lawe had voted twice — first to create the tie and then to break it.

For more on the 1980 strike and its aftermath, see Joshua Freeman, *Working Class New York*, pgs 284 – 288; Steve Burghardt, "The New York Transit Strike of 1980," *Against the Current* #1, Fall 1980; Jarvis Tyner and Bill Perelman, "What Were the Results of the 1980 NYC Transit Strike? A Communist Party USA Analysis." This is a reprint of "Transit Battle in the Big Apple," *Political Affairs*, August 1980 issue. Pamphlet in my possession.



TWU 100

The 11-day 1966 transit strike saw the arrest of nine leaders including Michael Quill and ended with workers winning a 15% wage increase.

union was fined for violating an injunction and it lost dues check-off. In addition, each worker who struck was fined one day's pay for each day they were on strike. Put another way, they weren't paid while on strike and they were fined an additional day for each day they struck. Although the extra wage increase won as a result of the strike paid for the fines within the first year, the fact the union did not succeed in eliminating the fines left many workers feeling they had been defeated.

The strike marked the high-water mark for the rank and file groups that had developed in the late-70s. In the 1981 election, the opposition failed to unite around a single slate. John Lawe was easily re-elected and his slate once again controlled the Executive Board.⁶

Socialists in Transit in the mid-1980s

By my count, in the 1980s thirteen groups had

supporters politically active in transit and in TWU 100. Each group saw this workforce and this union⁷ as important places to do political organizing to build a stronger union, a more powerful working class movement, and support for their version of socialist politics. Thus, for a few years, NYC Transit and TWU 100 served as laboratories where the political perspectives and strategies of a broad swath of the US left were tested against one another.

All of these groups, to a greater or lesser extent, considered themselves to be in the Leninist tradition of Marxism. This meant their work in unions was rooted in the analysis and critique of "economism" that Lenin presented in *What Is To Be Done?* Two passages, in particular, provided the foundation for their work. First was:

"...the Social-Democrat's ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every mani-

6. Of the over 20,000 votes cast, John Lawe received 11,732, Arnold Cherry and Mike Warren (who were each supported by a segment of Lawe's Executive Board opponents) got 5,272 and 3,228 votes, respectively. Ed Karsten, a candidate supported by the Spartacist League had 136 votes.
7. In the 1980s, and up until 2001, TWU 100, a union local with over 35,000 members (now 41,000) who worked 24/7 at hundreds of work locations throughout NYC, did not have local-wide meetings. When workers met as a union, they did so in division and section meetings. These were defined by job title or area of work. For example, Train Operators, Conductors and Tower Operators (the subway operating crews) were in the Rapid Transit Operations department. The Train Operators division (covering over 3000 members) met in one meeting, while the Conductors/Towers divisions (another 3000+ members) met in another. Bus Operators in the public sector were split among three different divisions that never met together. Those in the private sector met in several different sections, depending on their employer. The Local did not have its own newspaper. Instead, the officers used an insert placed in the national unions' monthly paper. In some parts of the union, stewards were elected. In others, they were appointed. There were few stewards and no stewards council.

festation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalize all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth before all his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for all and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat.”⁸

This led all the socialists in Local 100 to have a broader vision for their work — and the purpose of a union — than simply trying to improve the wages and benefits of the members of their union. The second passage was:

“We have said that there could not have been Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc.”⁹

This has generally been understood to mean that revolutionary class consciousness comes from outside the sphere of spontaneous day-to-day economic struggle.

Of course, this common foundation did not produce a common practice. Each group had its own understanding of the practice of prior generations of the left, its own experience in preceding years, its own assessment of the current state of working class consciousness, and its own conclusions about their immediate tasks — as well as their own commitment to broadening union struggles beyond the fights over working conditions and contracts to include political issues outside the workplace. With respect to the strategies they had for their work in transit in the 1980s, they can be grouped in three broad categories.

Build Organizations of the Rank and File

First were those who, while recognizing the importance of raising a political perspective that went beyond a more militant fight for better wages, benefits and working conditions, emphasized building organizations of the rank and file that would conduct that basic fight against management. They saw these organizations as both necessary in themselves and as the basis upon which class-struggle politics would be built in the TWU.

This first category included half the groups with supporters in transit. This shared overarching strategy made it possible for them to launch the *Hell on Wheels* (HoW) newsletter and, later, the *New Directions* caucus.¹⁰ The group I was in, Workers Power, was among them. The others were the Proletarian Unity League, the Revolutionary Workers Headquarters, the Fourth Internationalist Tendency, the League of Revolutionary Struggle, and Socialist Action.

Workers Power (WP), like the International Socialists (IS) from which it had split in 1979, encouraged members to get jobs in unionized workplaces where they would try to build organizations of the rank-and-file to fight harassment, exploitation, discrimination and other assaults by management. They would also push for unions to look beyond the negotiation of better wages and benefits for their own members, to take up fights against racism and sexism on the job and in the broader society, and to support workers fighting for liberation and democracy in other countries, such as South Africa, Poland and El Salvador.¹¹

As a result of the near total failure of the leadership in US unions to fight back against what was becoming known as “the employers’ offensive,” WP members, like most other socialists in unions, expected to find themselves in conflict with the leaders of their unions.

We did not explain this failure on the basis of union corruption (although that existed) or bad politics (though that existed, too). Rather, we had an understanding that, because of their place as mediators between the demands of their members and the needs of capital (or is it the needs of their members

8. *What Is To Be Done?* By V. I. Lenin, 1902, Lenin’s *Collected Works*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961, Moscow, **Volume 5**, pp. 347-530, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/iii.htm>

9. *What Is To Be Done?* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm>

10. For the leftists who came on the job in the 1980s, the 1980 strike not only underlined the importance of getting a job in transit, it also served as a generational marker. For example, all but one of the activists who helped launch Hell on Wheels in 1984 were hired after the 1980 strike. The sole exception was hired less than a year before the strike.

11. Those of us who split from the IS to form WP argued that the IS had become “de-politicized” and that, in its work in unions, it was blurring the distinction between “rank and file movements” that are independent of the union bureaucracy and “union reform movements” led by low-level union bureaucrats. See “Rank & File and Reform Movements in IS Labor Work,” by the Los Angeles IS branch, undated 1978. In my possession.

and the demands of capital?), union officials — the union bureaucracy — had come to constitute a distinct social layer of the working-class with its own interests to protect. Chief among those interests was protecting the bargaining relationship that provided this layer with its very reason for existence.

As a result of the bureaucratization of unions, they generally sought to avoid confrontations with bosses, accepted that their members' futures were tied to the profitability of the company and, "regardless of the attitudes of leadership, [were] unfit to wage effective struggle."¹²

Their role was (and is) to negotiate agreements — compromises — with bosses. Preserving that role, and protecting their interests, would sometimes lead them to call strikes. But it also prevented them from waging struggles that challenged the bargaining relationship that created this layer and provides it a standard of living that is (generally) higher than their members.

Although Workers Power did not rule out running for union office, we wanted to build rank-and-file organizations that would organize workers at the workplace to lead fights against management regardless of who held union office. We expected that, in the course of building these organizations and engaging in these fights, our unions would become more militant and democratic and large numbers of workers would become interested in socialist politics and the need not just to resist, but to replace, capitalism. At the time, we called this having "a rank-and-file orientation". It was a precursor of what has become known more recently as "the rank-and-file strategy,"¹³

I was the sole supporter of WP in transit in the mid-1980s. As a member of Workers' Power (and later, Solidarity), I would make reports on my work to NY branch meetings, which would discuss what I was doing in the context of the branch's overall perspectives. At national meetings, I participated in broader discussions of the labor movement and the work we were doing in a range of unions.

Those meetings, in particular, with their discussions of international events, anti-racist work, fem-

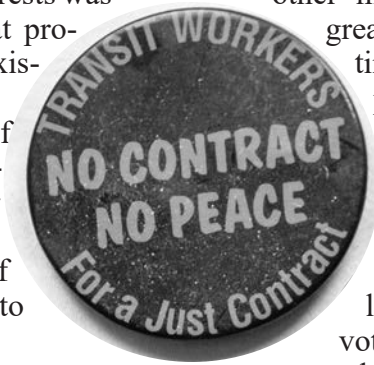
inist politics, the economic and political "nature of the period," etc., helped me withstand the pressures to limit my focus to the TWU and become just another militant trade unionist. I benefited greatly from my discussions and (at times) disagreements with more experienced comrades. To the extent they tried to direct my work, it was through persuasion.

While the group would vote on a broad "labor perspectives" document, unlike some groups on the left, neither WP nor Solidarity took votes to either endorse the work its members were doing in specific unions or to tell us what to do.

The **Proletarian Unity League (PUL)** was the other group that was key to pulling together the coalition that launched HoW and ND. While WP's roots were in the Trotskyist movement, the PUL was part of the New Communist Movement (NCM).¹⁴

In reaction to the practice in unions of some other groups from the NCM, the PUL rejected the "left leadership only" approach and sought to build the "left-center alliance." However, in order for such an alliance to work, they recognized the need to build up "the left," arguing that, "Without a left-wing, a left-center alliance is not possible both because no left exists for the center to ally with, and less obviously because little center leadership will emerge with which the left could ally." So they were more attuned to building up a left within the unions than they were to seeking alliances with the supposed "center."

In the PUL's view, "The left-wing arises in militant struggle against white-supremacist national oppression, and among oppressed nationality workers. ... The other section of the left-wing emerges mainly in the economic struggle, and often does not have a clearly distinguishable program for the working class and trade unions. ... The main task for Marxists in the trade unions today is to work for the unity and organization of the left-wing." They were committed to building the rank-and-file movement in unions and upheld rank-and-file caucuses



12. *The Rank & File Movement: Confronting Labor's Crisis in the 1980's*, by Kim Moody. A reprint of an article in the IS's magazine *Changes* in 1981. In my possession.

13. Kim Moody, *The Rank and File Strategy*, <https://solidarity-us.org/pdfs/RFS.pdf>

14. I met the PUL's sole supporter in transit at the 1983 *Labor Notes* conference. We began meeting to compare notes and talk about the union's politics. He brought along another transit worker he knew, a supporter of the Revolutionary Workers Headquarters. In the course of those conversations, we discussed starting a rank-and-file newsletter to try to help members and activists see what was going on in different parts of the Local and link up the fights against management that were taking place in isolation from one another.

Can Union Struggles Be Revolutionary?

While I agreed with Lenin's foundational call to bring a broad class-based vision into the organizing in the union, to be tribunes of the people, I was also strongly influenced by the arguments of Hal Draper and Richard Hyman. As a result, I had a "yes...but" attitude toward the argument that socialist consciousness must be brought to workers from outside their economic class-struggles.

In a series of talks in 1970, Draper argued that organizing for "more" from the employer on a consistent basis has a revolutionary logic in and of itself. He wrote:

For 50 or 75 years now, socialists have pointed out that Gompers' slogan¹ was pure reformism, but that the reformist leaders who use it really don't believe it themselves, and have been unable to carry it out consistently.... Only a Marxist revolutionary can mean it consistently. The struggle for more becomes revolutionary when it goes beyond the capabilities of the system to provide that "more." That is the link between the Marxist fight for reforms and the revolutionary perspective. It depends on the root idea that the economic problems of the system cannot be solved by the system. The class struggle depends on this "more." All that Marx claims is that in the course of this fight for "more" out of the system, regardless of what it does for the system, the struggle becomes, in the end, a revolutionary struggle. In the end; but not in the beginning. In the beginning it means a struggle for reforms and it means organizing on a low social and political level.

The class as a whole begins on a much lower level than the Marxist program itself, but the Marxist program says that this is revolutionary to begin with. From the beginning Marx puts the stress upon the basic goal – that the primary aim was to get the class as a whole moving, and that any such movement of the class as a whole was in itself and of itself progressive and revolutionary in its implications, because the class was.

The purely economic struggle does not automatically lead to revolution, but it does lead to the recognition that the economic struggle has its limits and, therefore, has to go over to a political struggle which brings it beyond the limits of capitalism – if that struggle is carried on consistently and without shrinking back from its consequences.²

Around the same time, *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism* by Richard Hyman was published. This pamphlet is a review of the thinking of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Michels and Gramsci on trade unions and their place in revolutionary strategies. In it, Hyman briefly discusses how the events of the 1905 Revolution shifted Lenin's thinking about the role union struggles can play in forming revolutionary consciousness in the working class. Hyman writes,

The issue between Lenin and Luxemburg, or between the Lenin of 1902 and the Lenin of 1905 was essentially the limits of trade union consciousness. The difference was ... a question of the degree to which trade union struggles rendered workers susceptible to a revolutionary broadening of consciousness; a question of the type of relationship to be established between the revolutionary party and spontaneous trade union activity.

In the final paragraph of the pamphlet, after his survey of the different "optimistic" and "pessimistic" takes on the revolutionary potential of trade union struggles, and writing about the state of union struggles in Great Britain at the time, he concludes:

Hence no general theory is available to relate the struggle for material reforms to the development of consciousness. (W)hether the circumstances are such as to permit a spontaneous bridging of the gap between activity and consciousness; whether exposure to co-ordinated attacks on long-established rights of trade union organization may precipitate a natural heightening of critical social awareness; or whether the limited horizons which now prevail will persist to make inevitable an interaction of defeat and demoralization – must remain as yet an open question, which in the last resort can be answered not by theoretical speculation but only through practical activity and practical experience. The theoretical issue, in other words, can be resolved only through the praxis of the struggle itself.³

Draper and Hyman convinced me that the line between trade union consciousness and socialist consciousness was more permeable than Lenin suggested in *What Is To Be Done?*. As I saw it, this did not change the need for an organization of revolutionaries, but it allows for greater spontaneity in the development of socialist consciousness than Lenin allowed for in 1902.

1. "We want more school houses and less jails; more books and less arsenals; more learning and less vice; more constant work and less crime; more leisure and less greed; more justice and less revenge; in fact, more of the opportunities to cultivate our better natures, to make manhood more noble, womanhood more beautiful and childhood more happy and bright. These in brief are the primary demands made by the Trade Unions in the name of labor. These are the demands made by labor upon modern society and in their consideration is involved the fate of civilization." from A Paper Read Before The International Labor Congress, Sept. 1893 by Samuel Gompers <http://www.gompers.umd.edu/1893%20more%20speech.html>
2. Hal Draper, Marx, "Marxism" and Trade Unions in *Socialism from Below*, edited by E. Haberkern, Humanities Press 1992 (this book was reissued by Haymarket Books in 2019)
3. *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism*, Richard Hyman, Pluto Press, 1971 https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/999577/mod_resource/content/1/HYMAN%2C%20Richard.%20Marxism%20and%20the%20sociology%20of%20trade%20unions-Pluto%20Press%20%281971%29.pdf

as an important expression of that movement.¹⁵

The PUL did not share WP's take on the union bureaucracy as a distinct social layer within the labor movement, and WP rejected the left-center alliance strategic perspective. In practice, they both rejected what the PUL called the "left-leadership only" approach and were committed to building up broad organizations of the rank-and-file, while engaging in fights against the boss. Both saw these struggles as key to the growth of a left in unions and the broader working-class.

Without this congruence between WP and PUL — Trots and Maoists — it's unlikely HoW would have been formed.¹⁶ Transit workers would still have pushed back against management and demanded better contracts and representation from the TWU, but the fightback would have looked very different from the one that actually developed. But WP and PUL were not the only socialist groups with supporters working on HoW. The others were:

The Revolutionary Workers Headquarters (RWH), which formed after a split from the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) in 1977. The split was triggered by differences over events in China, specifically the arrest of the Gang of Four. There were, however, differences over other matters, including how to approach work in unions.

In a document issued shortly after the split, the RCP wrote,

*"At the Founding Congress of the Revolutionary Communist Party in 1975, a formulation was adopted which said that 'The Party's main concentration — its 'center of gravity' — must now be in the day to day struggle of the workers around wages, working conditions, layoffs, jobs, etc...' This formulation and the policy it represented was wrong. It was formally repudiated by the Second Congress of the RCP in early 1978."*¹⁷

The RCP went on to accuse the RWH of "economism" for following that line. A majority of the RCP's members active in unions seem to have gone

with the RWH.

The Fourth Internationalist Tendency (FIT). Launched in 1984, the FIT was formed by people expelled from the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in 1983.¹⁸ For a time, the FIT considered themselves a "public faction" of the SWP and fought for reinstatement.

Their union strategy was laid out in a document written before they were expelled.¹⁹ They had one supporter active in HoW and ND from their founding. In 1992, a majority of the FIT voted to dissolve and join Solidarity. The supporter in the TWU chose not to, but remained part of *New Directions* until its dissolution.

The League of Revolutionary Struggle (LRS) was formed in 1978 through the merger of several organizations within the New Communist Movement. They had a strategic orientation toward what they called "the lower stratum of the working class."

By this they meant, "...low-paid, unskilled production workers in basic industry, manufacturing, service and agriculture. These workers are relatively more oppressed and, in many instances, suffer national and women's oppression as well. They are also, relatively speaking, less influenced by the corrupted labor leaders and are more open to progressive and socialist ideas."²⁰

They also called for the left to work in broad united fronts in order to defeat attacks by bosses and the government. For instance, "...the situation demands that the left take the lead to build the broadest front against the present onslaught against workers and unions. We should struggle for unity. We must be flexible enough to find allies wherever we can and firm enough not to sacrifice workers' interests in order to 'gain influence.'"²¹ This made them open to working within a group such as HoW.

They had two supporters in transit who became active with HoW after the first couple issues were produced. Their participation wound down as they became active in supporting Jesse Jackson's run for the Democratic Party nomination in 1988.

15. See *Fighting to Win: Left Progressive Unity in the Trade Unions in Labor's Survival/Labor's Revival*, United Labor Press, 1982.

16. In 1985, WP, the International Socialists, and a few other small groups merged to form Solidarity. The same year, PUL merged with the RWH and the Organization for Revolutionary Unity to form Freedom Road Socialist Organization.

17. "Center of Gravity" Repudiated, Economic Struggle & Revolutionary Tasks," *Revolution*, Vol. 3, No. 9, July 1978

18. The SWP had launched its own "turn to industry" beginning in 1978, rather later than the rest of the left. Inside the SWP (where they were the Fourth Internationalist Caucus) the FIT had defined themselves, in part, by their opposition to the way in which the SWP carried out its work in unions.

19. "Socialist Strategy for Class Struggle Transformation of the Unions" by Frank Lovell and Steve Bloom. This was prepared as a resolution to an SWP National Committee in August, 1983 and appears in *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism* #6, April, 1984. See Encyclopedia of Trotskyism On-Line (ETOL), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/bidom/n6-apr-1984-bom.pdf>

20. Labor in Reagan's U.S.A: Interview with Roberto Flores of the League of Revolutionary Struggle, *Forward*, Vol. 7, No. 1, January 1987. See EROL, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-7/lrs-labor.htm>

21. "Hormel, Labor Unity and the role of the left" by Paul Shapiro, *Unity*, Vol. 9, No. 3, February 21, 1986. See EROL, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-7/lrs-p-9.htm>

Within a few years, these groups were joined by **Socialist Action (SA)**. SA formed in 1983 by people expelled from the SWP at the same time as those who formed FIT. They had one supporter active in HoW and *New Directions*.

Like most groups from an orthodox Trotskyist tradition, SA made the call for a Labor Party central to its political identity. “The central propaganda slogan of the revolutionary socialist party today is “Build a labor party — independent working class political action.”

However, the SA called upon its members to be involved in immediate economic struggles on the job, to fight for greater union democracy, and to support rank-and-file caucuses engaged in those struggles. They were to call for a labor party, and promote other elements of their program, from the perspective of participants in struggles on the job and in the unions, not as advocates of all-purpose solutions.²²

Given that the US left of the 1970s and 80s was better known for the hostility often expressed between groups and the tendency to splinter, how were the groups involved in HoW able to work together and build, first, a newsletter and, then, a caucus capable of waging fights on the job, affecting the outcome of contract talks, and winning office?

There were several key factors. For starters, most of the groups that sent their members into working-class jobs in the 1970s had done so with grand visions of how much they would recruit, grow, and lead mass struggles. By the early 1980s, they realized this wasn’t happening any time soon. What was known as “party-building” had not paid off as expected. One consequence of this was that many on the left became more open to working with others, rather than competing with them to see whose party got built.

This reinforced another feature of HoW — none of the groups involved had more than two supporters present in transit. No one group could dominate the meetings or decisions even if they had wanted to.

And, as the thumbnail sketches above illustrate, these groups emphasized the need to organize among the rank-and-file around issues of resistance to the boss, democracy in the union, and opposition to racism on the job and in NYC. They operated on

the assumption that this organizing was worthwhile in and of itself AND it was part of creating interest in and support for socialists and their politics.

Provide “Revolutionary Leadership”

A second category consisted of those who, while recognizing the importance of fights over wages, benefits and working conditions, considered union struggles to be “reformist”. They emphasized raising “revolutionary politics”, or “providing revolutionary leadership” as the key to building a class-conscious core among transit workers.

Providing revolutionary leadership usually meant raising the correct programmatic demands more than building the organizations of the rank-and-file that could take up the fight against harassment, concessions and for democracy and rights. This approach was pursued by:

The **Spartacist League (SL)**. The SL emerged from an expulsion from the SWP in 1962. *Workers Vanguard*, the SL’s newspaper, provided extensive coverage of the 1980 transit strike. But the SL does not seem to have had people in place on the job able to play any role during the strike or the contract vote that followed. By 1981, there were a few transit workers who supported the SL. One, Ed Karsten, ran for Local 100 president and received 136 votes. He ran again in 1983. This time he was the only opponent of the incumbent and he got 1,017 votes. (There was no challenger for president in 1985.) By then, the SL had at least six supporters in transit.

In 1983, the SL’s supporters announced the formation of the *Committee for a Fighting TWU*.²³ Unlike *Hell on Wheels*, and later *New Directions*, this committee was intended to be the vehicle for one political perspective, the Spartacist League’s. This followed the line adopted by the SL roughly a decade earlier:

“The reporter stressed the need to build caucuses on the basis of the transitional program. Rejecting the workerist conception of work in the class, the SL sees the programmatically-based caucus as a link between the vanguard and the class, carrying out the unique political line of the party in the labor movement and ultimately winning real authority for the vanguard in the class. At the same time, the SL must intervene directly to reinforce the

22. “Socialist Strategy for Class Struggle Transformation of the Unions” by Frank Lovell and Steve Bloom. Also, Trade Union Resolution by Lynn Henderson and Nat Weinstein. Both of these were intended as resolutions to an SWP National Committee in August, 1983 and appear in Vol. 2, No 2 of the Socialist Action Information Bulletin, published in Feb. 1984. In my possession.

23. Campaign piece for Karsten, (undated) Fall 1983. In my possession.



work of its fractions through sustained sales of *WV* at the plants.”²⁴

What the SL meant by building a “programmatically-based caucus” was shown when Marian Swerdlow,²⁵ one of the HoW core, was invited to a *Committee for a Fighting TWU* meeting by an SL supporter. She asked, “How about inviting Steve Downs?” He replied, “even if he agreed with the committee’s full platform, he wouldn’t be invited because he supports Solidarnosc in Poland.”

The *Committee for a Fighting TWU* issued fliers at irregular intervals taking a position on contracts or elections. They also called for actions in response to racist attacks against transit workers and in NYC at large. After 1983, they did not participate in union elections. Nor did they participate in any broad coalitions in support of a better contract or in opposition to proposed agreements, such as the *Transit Workers for a Just Contract* coalition HoW launched in 1988.

They were early advocates of free public transit, with their demand to “rip out the turnstiles,” but they did not attempt to build a campaign for this position within the union. Calls for “a workers party that fights for a workers government” were regular-

ly tacked onto their leaflets.²⁶

The **League for the Revolutionary Party (LRP)** was founded in 1976. It was a split from a split from the IS. Refounding the 4th International was its central political task.²⁷ In the mid-1980s, it had one supporter working in transit. In 1988, he ran for a seat on the Local 100 Executive Board on what he called “the general strike strategy,” seeking to insert the call for a general strike into every fight against management.²⁸ He rejected voting for *New Directions* that year. He recommended voting for *New Directions* when it was on the verge of winning the Local’s top positions in 2000, but he still defined himself as “an opponent of *New Directions*.”

The **Workers League (WL)** was founded in 1966 as a result of a split from the SWP. They had two supporters who participated in HoW in its early days.²⁹

The WL’s political work was focused on their call for the formation of a Labor Party.³⁰ In fact, they claimed that, “...the defense of the most elementary rights of the members of TWU Local 100 cannot go forward without a break from the stranglehold of the capitalist two-party system.”

By 1990, the WL labeled *New Directions* “ac-

24. “Toward Construction of the Leninist Vanguard!” report on the Third National Conference, from *Workers Vanguard* No. 15, January 1973, reprinted in *Marxist Discussion Bulletin #9* 1982(?). ETOL, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/icl-spartacists/marxist-bulletins/MB-09-p1-2-3.pdf>

25. Swerdlow wrote a book about her experiences in transit: *Underground Woman*, Temple University Press, 1998.

26. For example, March 25, 1985 *Committee for a Fighting TWU* leaflet reprinted in *Workers Vanguard* #376, April 5, 1985, see ETOL, https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workersvanguard/1985/0376_05_04_1985.pdf

27. Twenty Years of the LRP by Sy Landy, appearing in *Proletarian Revolution* #53. Winter 1997.

28. Eric Josephson campaign flyer dated October, 1988. In my possession.

29. The WL is now the Socialist Equality Party, producers of the World Socialist Web Site.

30. “The central task confronting the Workers League was to fight for the political independence of the American working class from the bourgeoisie and its political parties, especially the Democratic Party. This assumed the form of the demand, in the conditions then prevailing in the United States, that the mass trade union organizations of the AFL-CIO form a labor party based on socialist policies.” *The Formation of the Workers League*, as posted on www.wsws.org.

complices of the bureaucracy” because it hadn’t called for a break with the Democratic Party and for promoting “the cynical lie that transit workers could win a decent contract without a strike and a political struggle against the Democratic Party”.³¹ The WL ran a retired transit worker, Ed Winn (who had served on the Local 100 Executive Board during the 1980 strike) for US president in 1984 and 1988.

During the strike against the NY *Daily News* that began in October 1990, the WL issued a flyer to transit workers. It concluded with, “The rank-and-file must demand strike action against the scabbing in the subways [people selling copies of the scab newspaper in the subway system - sd], as part of an indefinite citywide general strike, and as part of a new political strategy – the building of a Labor Party, the fight for the international unity of the working class and the establishment of a workers government based on a socialist program.”³²

The **Marxist-Leninist Party (MLP)** was founded in 1980 and was part of the New Communist Movement. Although the MLP did not have a presence in transit until after the 1980 strike, by 1986, four supporters had gotten jobs. An MLP flier against the 1985 contract appeared in July that year.³³

The MLP stated that, “A central part of the work of the Marxist-Leninist Party in the mass movements is the work to sever the masses from the influence of the reformist and liberal-labor flunkies of the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party is equally a capitalist, imperialist and racist party as the Republican Party, but has its own special role. The Democratic Party is the main party for deceiving the working masses and convincing them that capitalism can solve their problems.”³⁴

However, unlike the Trots who held a similar analysis of the Democratic Party, they did not call for an immediate break from the Democrats. Rather, they called for building up the independent organizations of the working-class. This would, in turn, facilitate a break from the DP.

In the unions, their perspective was to condemn the role of the trade union bureaucracy, arguing

that, “The capitalist assault on the working masses is being directly assisted by the trade union bureaucrats.” Union bureaucrats “function as agents of the capitalists within the workers’ movement. As part of the aristocracy of labor, they enjoy privileged positions which separate them from the interests of the rank-and-file.”³⁵ They maintained the importance of economic struggles, advocating, “using the economic struggle to build the workers’ revolutionary movement”³⁶ while also recognizing that, “workers cannot restrict themselves to the economic struggle alone. They must build up their own independent political movement, a movement which is independent of and opposed to the politics of the capitalist class.”³⁷

The MLP rejected a Left-Center Unity approach. “Revolutionary work in the unions is not aimed at achieving a reconciliation with the trade union bureaucracy...It is aimed at eliminating the influence of the bureaucrats among the workers.” Their perspective was to “encourage the workers to organize independently of the trade union bureaucracy”, although they also maintained that, “The core that the MLP seeks to build at the factories is the party organization itself.”³⁸ The MLP did not prohibit members from running in union elections, but it was a low-priority.

The MLP occupied a position somewhere between the groups working together to build rank-and-file organization and those who emphasized providing revolutionary leadership. Although their self-definition was closer to the latter group, they put more effort into building organizations to lead the fight on the job. After the MLP dissolved in 1993, a few former members became involved in *New Directions*.

Influence the Officials

The third strategic approach was followed by those who, while recognizing the importance of the day to day fight on the job, believed the surest way forward for the left in the union was to get close to parts of the union leadership in order to influence them in a more progressive direction. Those groups

31. A Fighting Program for Transit Workers, Workers League Statement, published by Labor Publications 1990 p. 10.

32. Sonny Hall and the *Daily News* Strike, Workers League flyer reprinted from Dec 21, 1990 issue of The Bulletin. In my possession.

33. Curiously, although this flyer was headlined Fight the Giveback Contract!, it did not urge Local 100 members to vote no. Instead, after explaining what was known of the givebacks in the contract, it called on members to “...organize for mass meetings to discuss all the contract details ... before we cast our votes.”

34. Documents of the 2nd Congress of the Marxist-Leninist Party USA, Fall 1983, published in *Workers' Advocate* Vol. 14, #1 January, 1984, p. 20. See EROL, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-7/mlp-2.pdf>

35. Ibid, p.21.

36. Ibid p.22.

37. Ibid p.24.

38. Ibid p.27.

were:

The **Communist Party (CP)** provides the clearest example of this approach. The CP had been a presence in transit since before the TWU was formed. It played a key role in the founding of the union and in its leadership for the first 15 years or so of its existence.³⁹ The CP dubbed its overall approach in unions as building the “left-center alliance.” During the early '80s, at least, there was little theorization of what this meant. Left and center were not defined by political positions or strategies. Rather, they simply reflected an assessment of where individuals or organizations stood relative to one another. For example,

in 1979, General Secretary Gus Hall, commenting on movement in the AFL-CIO Executive Council, stated, “Many have become dissidents from class collaboration. Many have moved to a more militant Center position.” Also, “What we call the Center is a force that is breaking with, and moving away from, the worst features of class collaboration.”⁴⁰ But, “there are some areas where the Center forces...do not yet take a Center position.” This should not be “...a roadblock(s) to Left and Center unity.”⁴¹

This section of the report concluded with, “The positive developments in some sections of the trade union leadership are very important. We must continue to work with them. But we must make it absolutely clear that this does not in any way replace our emphasis on the grass roots and the need for rank and file forms.”⁴² By the mid-1980s, this emphasis seemed to have been forgotten, at least among the party’s supporters in TWU 100.

At its 1983 convention, the CP described Center forces as “increasingly repelled by Right-wing forces” and argued it was necessary for the CP to build up Left forces to attract them. That same convention described the AFL-

CIO early endorsement of Mondale to be the Democratic Party candidate for president in 1984 as “a step towards labor becoming an independent electoral force...It is the beginning of the end of the old policy of “rewarding our friends [labor’s] and punishing our enemies.” Interestingly, in light of the movement of other socialist groups into ‘industry’

in the '70s, this convention acknowledged that the CP’s “focus on industrial concentration has diminished” and called for “a revitalized Party policy of industrial concentration.”⁴³

In March, 1984, as discussions were taking place among socialists in transit (including CP supporters) to launch the rank-and-file



Strike action mobilizes the membership.

newsletter *Hell on Wheels* (HoW), the newsletter *Direction* appeared on the job. It identified itself as “the voice of the transit workers of the Communist Party, USA.”⁴⁴ I don’t recall seeing a second issue. Just before the first issue of HoW came out, those activists close to the Communist Party stopped coming to meetings.⁴⁵ Although they never gave a reason, it seems they left because the newsletter would be openly critical of the union’s leadership.⁴⁶ At the time, the CP had at least 5 supporters in TWU 100.

In October, 1985, about a year after the first issue of HoW, CP supporters among the subway crews began producing a newsletter called *Voice*. Unlike *Direction*, this was not a “party” publication. It provided information to Train Operators, Conductors and Tower Operators about the contract and what management was up to, but did not encourage any actions that went beyond filing grievances (beginning in 1990, they expanded their scope to include other divisions).

Supporters of the Workers World Party and the Communist Labor Party had defaulted to a version of this approach. Both groups had been active in support of one of the opposition groups in the late 1970s. By the mid-'80s, they had (each with

39. For more on the CP’s role in the early years of the TWU, see Joshua Freeman, *In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City 1933-1966*.

40. I wonder what the best features of class collaboration are.

41. Labor Up-Front, Report to the 22nd Convention of the CPUSA held in Detroit 8/23/79. Pp. 34-36.

42. Labor Up-Front, p. 43.

43. For Peace, Jobs, Equality: Prevent “The Day After,” Defeat Reaganism, Report to the 23rd Convention of the CPUSA held in Cleveland, OH, Nov 10-13, 1983, pgs 29 & 65, published by New Outlook Publishers, Dec 1983.

44. Copy in my possession.

45. There had been 3 people from the CP working on the newsletter. After being told to stop, one (who had suggested the name for the newsletter) left the CP and remained with the Hell on Wheels group.

46. “A Rank and File Chronicle: ‘Hell on Wheels’ in TWU Local 100,” Steve Downs, *Against the Current*, March/April 1987.

one supporter on the job) retreated from building local-wide organizations and served as officers in their own divisions while trying to maintain working relationships with both *Hell on Wheels* and low-level officers in the administration.

The **Communist Labor Party (CLP)** was founded in 1974, tracing its roots back to a strongly pro-Stalin current that split from the CPUSA in 1958, in the course of the efforts by the CP to come to terms with the criticisms of Stalin revealed in Khrushchev's 1956 speech *On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences*.⁴⁷

The CLP rejected the Left-Center Unity approach, "This tactic of 'Left-Center Unity' rejects the Leninist approach that the communist party must establish the hegemony of revolutionary socialist ideas over the proletariat" and concluded that, as applied by the CP, it did not result in moving the Center to the Left; rather, the Left capitulated to the Center.⁴⁸

They were a more clandestine organization than the other groups present in transit. A report made to a CLP trade union conference held in 1978 laid out the "fundamental task in the trade unions and shops — the building of the illegal organizations of the party and the distribution of communist agitation and propaganda" for the "injection of socialism into the spontaneous movement." They argued for the centrality of the fight to repeal Taft-Hartley as "the leading tactic for a United Front against Fascism and War of the working class."⁴⁹

The **Workers World Party (WWP)** was formed in 1959, following a split from the SWP. Inside the SWP, they'd had a fairly positive view of the People's Republic of China (considering it to be a workers' state) and had supported the Soviet Union's intervention in Hungary in 1956. Trade union work

was not a priority for the WWP, but they did have people involved in some unions and industries.

In *High Tech, Low Pay*, Sam Marcy, the WWP's chairperson and one of its founders discussed the difficulty of carrying out successful strikes during a period of capitalist crisis and decline. He criticized the trade union bureaucracy for not recognizing this. Marcy argued that unions should make demands



John Simino and Corine Scott-Mack at New Directions rally, 1994.

for the public takeover of industry under workers' control central to their efforts to defend workers during periods of recurring recessions. This included calling for the seizure and occupation of plants threatened with closure. Marcy was critical of the union leadership's failure to fight, writing that, "AFL-CIO labor bureaucracy, in its aversion to any test of strength, reflects the fear and apprehensions not of the workers but of the ruling class." But he did not

offer a theory about why this was so or a strategy for challenging the labor bureaucracy. He simply called on them to do better.⁵⁰

Who Were the Socialists Trying to Reach?

Most, if not all, of the socialists on the job considered themselves to be revolutionaries, so the differences in strategies were not due to self-definition. Rather, they were over how they saw the potential for union struggles to lead to revolutionary conclusions and who the audience for socialist politics was, or, put another way, who should we try to move and how can we move them?

The audience for the revolutionary message was, admittedly, very small. In a discussion of their work in TWU 100 printed in 2001, the LRP wrote, "In the '80s and '90s, our propaganda was distributed broadly but was aimed chiefly at reaching a very narrow layer of far-seeing workers who would be interested in revolutionary socialism."⁵¹

47. This became known as "the secret speech" <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115995>

48. The Road to Socialism, Documents, Third Party Congress, Communist Labor Party, November 1980. See EROL, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/nem-7/clp-3rd/section-f.htm>

49. "The Strategy and Tactics of the CPUSA and the CLP in the Trade Unions: A Comparison" by Anna Magnani presented at a CLP conference on work in unions held in Detroit, Nov 1978 published in *Appeal to Reason*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Autumn 1979.

50. *High Tech, Low Pay: A Marxist Analysis of the Changing Character of the Working Class* by Sam Marcy, World View Publishers, 1986.

51. "Revolutionary vs. Reformist Methods in the Unions," *Proletarian Revolution* #63, Fall 2001, <http://lrp-cofi.org/PR/methodsPR63.html>

The MLP also set itself the task of carrying out “steadfast revolutionary work” and “building up the revolutionary party.”⁵² In 1988, they stated, “consciousness of the need for revolutionary change, of the need for the overthrow of the exploiting minority by the exploited majority, is an essential part of developing the mass struggle.”⁵³

However, they were less propagandistic than the SL, WL and LRP. In fact, their practice looked more like that of the groups working on *Hell on Wheels* and *New Directions*. In a report on their work in transit, a supporter wrote, “Our transit leaflets have concentrated on the takeback offensive and the treachery of the union bureaucrats, while supporting any struggles that have broken out and calling for building the independent movement and organization of the workers.”⁵⁴ In the second half of 1990, the NY branch of the MLP produced a series of *New York Workers’ Voice* newsletters directed at transit workers. They were usually two-sided flyers that highlighted issues of safety or contract violations on the job and then had articles on topics such as apartheid, abortion rights, the war on drugs, or the first Gulf War on the back. With the exception of a call for revolution in South Africa, there was no expression of the need for revolution, the overthrow of capitalism, or for socialism.⁵⁵

Supporters of the SL,⁵⁶ the WL⁵⁷ and the LRP⁵⁸, above all else, were propagandists who saw their main task in TWU 100 to be building their group (this does not mean they didn’t participate in any of the fights that took place around them, just that those fights were secondary to reaching that very narrow layer).

Those involved in *Hell on Wheels* and *New Directions* sought to reach a wider layer — those workers who could be organized to fight against management. While engaging with that layer, those of us in WP, PUL, RWH, FIT, SA and LRS would work to organize them on a broader, more political, basis than “contract unionism”. By organizing that wider layer to fight management, and bringing class politics with us, we hoped to increase the pool of class conscious workers and, thereby, the layer who would be interested in revolutionary socialism.

In contrast to the calls for building a revolutionary party, a general strike, or socialism that the SL, LRP, and WL presented in their flyers, in its first campaign, *New Directions* wrote: “An active and involved membership is the key to breaking the chains of the Taylor Law, binding arbitration and a grievance procedure that works in management’s favor. The Hall slate discourages the membership from being involved, from fighting back. *New Directions* encourages it. The platform on the other side outlines how we will do that.”⁵⁹ That platform called for direct election of VPs, organizers, and stewards; strengthening the stewards system; the members to have copies of the complete proposed agreements before voting on them; for company-paid childcare; running candidates who are independent of the Democratic and Republican parties; breaking the back of the Taylor Law by being strong enough to ignore it.

During the 1994 contract round, Solidarity issued a flyer speaking directly to transit workers. It included the following:

52. Documents of the 2nd Congress of the Marxist-Leninist Party, USA, printed in *The Workers Advocate*, Vol. 14, No. 1, January 1, 1984, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/nem-7/mlp-2.pdf>

53. Resolution on Tasks of the class struggle, 3rd Congress of the Marxist-Leninist Party, USA, printed in *The Workers’ Advocate*, Vol. 18, No. 1, Dec. 1, 1988, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/nem-7/mlp-3rd-congress-res.pdf>

54. Report on the New York Transit Work, Oct. 1986, in my possession.

55. *New York Workers’ Voice*, June 10, 1990 – Sept. 18, 1990 (unnumbered), in my possession.

56. In the middle of a slow down by Train Operators and Conductors to protest being blamed for a series of derailments, supporters of the SL issued a flyer declaring, “We need a political strategy: Break with the bosses parties — for a workers party to fight for a workers government! Cancel the debt — expropriate the banks and the bloodsucking utilities Con Ed and the phone co. Tear out the token machines — for free, safe, rapid transit for the working people of this city! For labor/black mobilizations to stop racist attacks!” We’ve Had It!, flyer produced by supporters of the SL. 7/13/83. In my possession.

57. An example, “It is the capitalist system of production for profit which is the cause of the decay of mass transit and the attacks on transit workers. The working class requires a socialist strategy to defeat these attacks. We must build a revolutionary opposition in the union that will drive Hall, Finkel and all of management’s men out of the TWU.” —Allen Cherry for UMD Chairman, campaign flyer 10/87. In my possession.

And, “We urge workers to vote for Allen Cherry in the Rapid Transit Division, and to begin the construction of a revolutionary opposition throughout the union based on the policies advocated by the Workers League.” Transit Workers Must Build Revolutionary Leadership, *Bulletin*, November 18, 1988. In my possession

58. An example, “I believe that the only way to fight back and start moving ahead is to build a workers’ revolutionary party for leadership of the unions and the whole working class.” And, “It is because I am fighting for a well-organized strike, a general strike and socialism that I am best suited to fight the bosses every day in the field.” Fighting the Bosses — For a Change, election flyer for LRP supporter Eric Josephson, October 1988. In my possession.

59. Vote For A New Direction, campaign flyer, October 1988. In my possession.

“Some socialist groups say that the only way to win a good contract is with a general strike in New York City. Or, they say that a workers’ government following socialist politics is the key. We’d like to see these things happen, too, but they’re not going to happen soon. In the meantime, there is plenty that can be done to win a good contract and, in the process, help transform the TWU and the rest of the labor movement so that a general strike becomes more realistic.

If New Directions defeats the Seda slate in the fall, transit workers will be in a much better position to fight management, whether on the job everyday or at the next negotiations. However, that won’t solve your problems.

The attacks transit workers face are rooted deep in changes in the regional economy that are themselves the result of the severe crisis that capitalism has been going through for over 20 years. Although we can still win some victories, they will not be secure because no group of workers can overcome that crisis in isolation. Nor can we overcome it without building an alternative to the crisis-ridden system — capitalism — itself. That’s where Solidarity comes in.

We are with you in your fight for a good contract, a strong union, and a decent life. If you agree that that fight does not take place in a vacuum; if, like us, you want to fight the disease as well as its symptoms; if you choose socialism over barbarism, contact us. We’ll stand with you in that fight, too.”⁶⁰

Being Political

Supporters of all of the groups in transit had come onto the job to help build the fight against the boss. They had a vision of what counts as a union issue that looked beyond the fight for a better contract and the limits accepted by most union leaders. And they wanted to build a base for socialist politics and the socialist movement among their co-workers. All of them, in one way or another, had to figure out how to “be political” on the job.

Those of us working on *Hell on Wheels* had a few ways to do this. While the newsletter focused on immediate questions on the job, from seniority

rights and health and safety to union democracy and the need for direct action (slowdowns and strike preparations) to win decent contracts, we included political issues from outside the workplace. From the first issue we talked about racism on the job and in the city and highlighted instances of racist police violence. We built support for strikes by workers at Greyhound, Hormel and Eastern Airlines. We organized for the March Against Apartheid in Central Park in 1986 and opposed the invasion of Iraq in 1991.⁶¹ These, and other issues, were pushed as part of our efforts to expand what transit workers thought of as legitimate union issues. After a few years, as part of that effort to get active transit workers to look at their work with a broader perspective, a few of us got a small bundle of Labor Notes every month. We distributed this among supporters at ND meetings and on the job.

A few of us had publications from our socialist organization that we would sell or giveaway to ND activists. Socialist Action had a monthly newspaper and their supporter regularly brought copies to our meetings. The PUL (and then Freedom Road) had a magazine (*Forward Motion*) and their supporters would bring copies. WP’s (and then Solidarity’s) publication, *Against the Current*, was not written for a mass audience. But, when there was an article I thought might be of interest, I would bring the magazine and either sell it or give it to people in ND. Likewise with pamphlets on labor issues that Solidarity produced in those years. Solidarity’s NY branch produced leaflets explicitly directed to transit workers and distributed them at rallies during the contract fights in 1992 and 1994.⁶²

The CP, SL, WL and MLP all had party newspapers. And, at least for a time, they all had the practice of non-transit workers selling (or giving away) the paper outside of a few locations where there were large numbers of transit workers or one of their supporters worked. All but the CP also produced occasional leaflets to address major issues facing transit workers. Except for an article supporting Jesse Jackson in 1988, the newsletter that supporters of the CP were involved with, *Voice*, did not raise political issues from outside the workplace.

The LRP had a magazine, which their supporter would try to sell to activists around ND. He also put

60. For A Just Contract...And A Just Society, Solidarity issued flyer, Spring 1994. In my possession.

61. Over the years our print-run grew from 2000 to 15,000 copies an issue. We had a couple runs of 20,000 during contract fights or the 2000 local union election.

62. What’s the Big Deal?, and For A Just Contract...And A Just Society, Solidarity issued flyers, May 1992 and Spring 1994. In my possession. The flip side of my bringing Solidarity literature to ND meetings was Solidarity members helping to distribute HoW. I regularly asked members of the NY branch to take copies with them and hand them to transit workers, especially Station Agents and Bus Operators, as they traveled around the city.

a lot of effort into producing leaflets about the sell-outs in or out of office and the need for a general strike in order for TWU to win a good contract.

Running for Office in the Union

With the exception of the MLP, supporters of every other socialist group in TWU 100 ran for office in the union.⁶³ Each group's supporters had to decide what to run for – whether to run for a position they might win or for positions they would certainly lose. They also had to make a choice about what kind of campaign to run — a “propaganda” campaign or “running to win.”

Broadly speaking, there were five types of positions to run for — local-wide executive positions (president, secretary-treasurer, recording-secretary, and vice-presidents), Executive Board, division committees, section officers, and convention delegates.

In the 1980s, no challenger had a chance of winning a local-wide seat. Running for one of those, which supporters of the SL did in 1981 and 1983, and *New Directions* did in 1988, was done for propaganda purposes, i.e., to make the politics of the candidate better known throughout the local in the hope of attracting some support.

Seats on the Executive Board and division and section committees were elected by divisions or parts of divisions. These seats could be won by opponents of the leadership and it was usually the case that critics of the administration held a few of these seats. A seat on the Executive Board gave the person a (small) voice on what was supposed to be the Local's policy-making body. The division committee was tasked with representing members on the job on a day-to-day basis. Many of them were on company-paid release time to provide representation. They were, in effect, the chief stewards (sometimes the only stewards) for the division. Section officers were elected by small groups of workers, say, the members in a single bus depot. Like division officers, they were supposed to represent their members on a day-to-day basis. Most section officers were not on release time. The term of office for Local officers, division and section officers and Ex-

ecutive Board members is three years. Conventions are held every four years and the delegate serves for one week.⁶⁴

After 1983, the Spartacist League stopped running in union elections. Outside of HoW, supporters of the CP, CLP, WWP, WL, LRP regularly ran for low-level positions in the Local in the 1980s and 1990s.



When *New Directions* ran in 1988, we did so to expand our base beyond the subway crews. After four years of putting out *Hell on Wheels*, our core group was actually shrinking. We believed there was broader support, but we needed to demonstrate it and draw in new people. At the time, drawing on Solidarity's analysis, I thought we should avoid running for positions where we would be responsible for administering a bad contract. I favored running for Local-wide positions (which we couldn't win but would enable us to talk with people throughout the local) and Executive Board positions (which we might win and where, once a month, we could present our views on what the union should be doing and, usually, get into an argument with the local's top officers) but not for division officer spots (which we might win and then have to administer the contract we had opposed).

That year, *New Directions* ran Tim Schermerhorn (a Train Operator or T/O) for president. I ran for Secretary-Treasurer. We also ran five candidates for Vice-President and candidates for Executive Board seats in the Train Operator, Car Equipment, Track, and MaBSTOA Division 1.⁶⁵ We did not run anyone for a division officer position. Schermerhorn won among the subway crews and received 22% of the vote local-wide. ND's candidates for Executive Board from the T/O division were elected. Most important to us, we picked up several new activists for HoW. By and large, these people did not come out of the left.

By the 1991 election my view on running for Division officer slots had changed because our supporters among the subway crews made it clear that they wanted us to represent them in their dealings with management. It became unacceptable for us

63. The MLP did not bar its supporters from running for union office, but it was discouraged. After the MLP dissolved in 1993, former supporters who remained in transit did run for offices in the union.

64. Until 2009, convention delegates were elected roughly six months before the convention. Since 2009, they are elected at the same time as the general election for other officers. As a result, where delegate elections once served, in part, as a referendum on how the other officers are doing, they are now disconnected from the timing of the actual convention and reflect the same snapshot of support as shown by the general election.

65. In a show of HoW's narrow reach, four of our seven candidates for Local-wide positions were Train Operators. We could only do that because VPs were elected Local-wide, not by department.

not to challenge the incumbents across the board. That year, we still had to fill out the Local-wide slate with T/Os (six out of 9 local-wide candidates). Schermerhorn got a third of the vote running for president and ND won Executive Board seats in five divisions. We also won division officer seats in several divisions.⁶⁶

Running to Build or Running to Win?

In the 1994 election, Schermerhorn received 45% of the vote and ND won most of the Executive Board seats (and many for division officer) in the subway divisions. Despite this, we still lost all the local-wide positions because our vote in the bus divisions was low. This result strengthened the position of those in ND who argued that no amount of organizing on the job would matter if we didn't hold the top spots, as opposed to those of us who felt that winning the top positions would follow from successful organizing around daily issues on the job. This led to a prolonged discussion of whether we were "running to win" or not.

Schermerhorn and I had been the principal voices in favor of an approach we called "running to build." For us, winning the top spots would come if we were successful at building ND's base. ND's base would be built by organizing the members to push back against management and the union officers who got in the way of that push back. And, during elections, we had to tell the members what would be necessary — what they would have to do — for Local 100 to win on the big challenges we faced. In our opinions, the fact that ND's vote and number of Executive Board and Division officer seats won grew from election to election supported this position.

But those who insisted we needed to "run to win" argued that we couldn't accomplish much without winning the top spots. For them, the fact we hadn't yet won the top spots was evidence that we needed to change our approach. The changes they thought were necessary came down to two: changing our candidate for president and toning down the calls for militant action. This wing of ND won out after we narrowly lost the 1997 election (Schermerhorn

received 49.5% of the vote).⁶⁷

Commenting on the interplay between running and building, Tim Schermerhorn remarked,

"There's a healthful and unhealthy dynamic in running for office. You attract this decidedly better element in the two years after an election when you were doing things in the field, when you were organizing, when you're fighting the boss. Come election time, you attract a lot of negative elements that you weed out as best you can. It's not just the worst of them. The best of them is they aren't big opportunists. They just have very much an orientation toward the way things are not toward how you have to function differently even when you're in power.

*What happened in the '97, '98 rerun is ... the best situation for us was run one year and they get two years of healthful fighting the boss. Now, when we ran in '97 and they ran it again in '98, not only is that exhausting, but we had two years of attracting the less healthy elements with only one year in between, rather than two years of attracting the more healthy elements with only a one election year coming up."*⁶⁸

In 2000, the two changes needed to "run to win" were achieved. The ND membership chose Roger Toussaint, the chair of the Track Division, as our candidate for president. Toussaint, who had argued that we had to appear less radical to pull the votes we need to win, ran a campaign focused more on cleaning up the Local than on the need for militant action against management, the mayor and the governor.⁶⁹

Electoral Politics Outside of TWU

Most of the socialists in TWU 100 in the mid-1980s would probably have agreed with the MLP's assessment that "The Democratic Party is equally a capitalist, imperialist and racist party as the Republican Party, but has its own special role. The Democratic Party is the main party for deceiving the working masses and convincing them that capitalism can solve their problems."⁷⁰ As a result, their

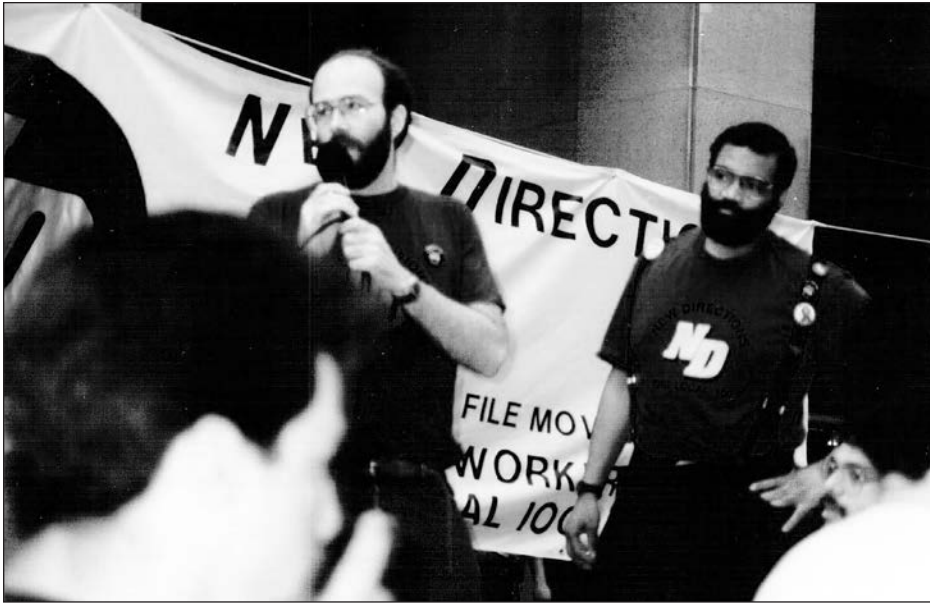
66. At that time, a candidate for a Local-wide or Executive Board seat could also run for division office. So, we could run Tim Schermerhorn for Local president and, knowing he wouldn't win, run him for a division office (he won a Division Vice-Chair seat) so that T/Os could have him as a representative. That election tactic was banned as part of a set of amendments to the Local By-laws in 1999.

67. For more on the changes in ND after the 1994 election until its victory in 2000, see *Hell on Wheels: The Success and Failure of Reform in Transport Workers Union Local 100*, by Steve Downs, published by Solidarity 2008. <https://solidarity-us.org/hellonwheels/>

68. Interview with Tim Schermerhorn, pg 12, 8/21/19, in my possession.

69. Shortly after taking office in 2001, Toussaint highlighted this change in ND's tone as a part of the reason for his victory. *New Regime Faces Transition*, Mark Daly, *The Chief-Leader*, 2/16/01.

70. Documents of the 2nd Congress of the Marxist-Leninist Party USA, Fall 1983, *publkers' Advocate* Vol. 14, #1 January, 1984, p.20. See EROL, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-7/mlp-2.pdf>



Steve Downs and Tim Schermerhorn at 1994 contract rally.

involvement in electoral politics was minimal. The CP supported Frank Barbaro's campaign for NYC mayor in 1981 and ran its own candidate for president in 1984 and 1988. The FIT supported Mel Mason, the SWP's candidate for president in 1984. The LRS supported Jesse Jackson in 1984, and did so even more strongly in 1988. Ed Karsten ran for Manhattan Borough President on the Spartacist ticket in 1985.

Jesse Jackson in 1988

Hell on Wheels could have run into problems over how to relate to the 1988 Jesse Jackson campaign for the Democratic Party nomination for president. In late 1987, some in HoW argued that we should endorse Jackson and actively support his campaign. Others opposed this, arguing both against supporting someone running in the Democratic Party and that working on Jackson's campaign would distract from the work of building a broad rank-and-file movement. The lines were basically drawn between those who came out of the New Communist Movement (wanted to support Jackson) and those who had roots in the Trotskyist tradition (did not want to support a candidate in the DP). In the end, we did not endorse Jackson, but we ran an article by one of the newsletter's founders urging support for Jackson. A year later, *New Directions's* platform in the 1988 union election included a plank to "End dependence on the Democratic and Republican parties" that concluded "We should use our COPE money to organize with other unions and groups like the Rainbow Coalition to run independent candidates who will truly, and finally, represent the interests of working people." As mentioned above,

the LRS supporters didn't return to working on HoW after getting involved in the Jackson campaign.

1991 - 1992 Two Decisive Years for Local 100 and New Directions

The fight over the contract that expired in April, 1991, gives us a chance to compare these different approaches as they played out during a critical period and campaign.

The 1991 Contract Fight

In October, 1990, *Hell on Wheels* reached out to other networks of activists in Local 100 and proposed a joint committee to fight for a good contract. On October 18 and 19, the Nubian Society, Transit Women United, Tier 3/ Tier 4 Slate (Station Dept), MaBSTOA Tier 4 Committee and HoW sponsored meetings to (re)launch Transit Workers for a Just Contract (TWJC). Supporters of the SL and LRP attended these meetings, but did not participate in the workings of TWJC.

TWJC's platform included calls for mass membership meetings and for copies of the full proposed agreement to be available to the membership before any ratification vote. It demanded No Concessions and the restoration of what had been lost in past contracts; protection and extension of seniority and pick rights; paid parental leave and TA-financed childcare; the elimination of penalties for using sick leave; full protection against increases in the cost of living; and the elimination of the "no strike" pledge.

TWJC produced a series of informational bulletins throughout the talks, as well as a black-on-white button that stated No Givebacks!, and the name of the committee. These buttons were sold to raise money for TWJC's expenses.

When the contract expired in April, no tentative agreement had been reached. ND members on the Local's Executive Board agreed with the proposal to extend the deadline, rather than call for an immediate strike. Around that time, the Local 100 leadership wrote:

"The Danger

There is only one threat to our success — it's the few members who attack their union leadership, instead of management. They hope we will lose. Think about it.— when we win, how will they get the strike they so badly want.

And even more importantly, how will they get some members to buy their No Give-back buttons at a cost of 2 for \$3.00? The danger is not the few would-be leaders whose only agenda is strike and misinformation. The danger is the true TWU member who says nothing to support their union, and the result may be that newer members are being misled. Our union and its officers have earned support and need it to succeed.

What danger do we face? The danger is not speaking up for your union leaders!!!”⁷¹

1991 Local Elections

By the time of the Local 100 elections in Dec, there was still no tentative settlement. ND believed there actually was one but, we argued, the Local administration was waiting until after the election to release it out of fear that it would cost them the election. ND ran Tim Schermerhorn for president again. He received a third of the votes. And ND won Exec Board seats in the Train Operator, Conductor, Track, Line Equipment/Signals and Car Equipment divisions.⁷²

In late January 1992, a proposed settlement was announced. TWJC, ND, the SL, LRP, WL, CP and MLP all opposed the agreement and began campaigning for its rejection. As part of that campaign, TWJC called for a “rally and speak out against the contract” outside the Transit Authority’s headquarters in downtown Brooklyn February 12. After the rally, ND member Jaime Veve⁷³ led roughly 1000 transit workers onto the Brooklyn Bridge (a few blocks from the TA’s building).⁷⁴ We shut down the bridge, marching across it to a rally in City Hall Park. Then, about 300 transit workers took the train

uptown to the union hall where they packed a meeting of the Conductor’s division demanding information about the contract. Union staff, claiming they were being held hostage, called the police to remove union members from the hall.

Later that month, as the vote on the proposal neared, ND wrote, “...what will happen if the contract is voted down? The union should go back to the bargaining table to negotiate a better deal. We should use the extra time gained to organize ourselves and prepare to fight to win a decent contract. We should use the threat of a strike or job action during the Democratic National Convention this summer as leverage to get a better offer.” And, “Is there an alternative to



binding arbitration? Yes, united action by the membership. It could be marches, slow-downs, sick-outs — even a strike. Most of us realize that a strike will be necessary sooner or later if we are to win real improvements in our wages, working conditions and pensions. Without the threat of disruption, the MTA and the state legislature have not — and will not — take our concerns seriously. We also recognize that a strike requires careful organization and preparation and a willingness to do whatever is necessary to win. That is why most of us don’t trust the current officers to lead a strike.”⁷⁵

TWJC and ND organized a protest outside of the MTA’s offices in midtown Manhattan on March 3. Several hundred transit workers then marched across town and up to the TWU hall. This time, they were met by a cordon of police barricades and were prevented from entering the building.⁷⁶

On March 18, Local 100 members rejected the

71. TWU Local 100 Membership Contract Update, May, 1991. In my possession.

72. I was elected to the Executive Board from the Train Operators Division.

73. Veve had been ND’s candidate for chair of the Train Operators Division in the Dec. 1991 election. Although the rest of our slate of division officers won, he narrowly lost. In January, 1992, he was the main leader of a broad slowdown on the subway trains that defeated an effort by the TA to erode seniority rights for T/Os and C/Rs.

74. Transit Protesters Lengthen the Rush Hour, *NY Times*, February 13, 1992.

75. Sonny says: Ratify — or else! ND contract flyer. February, 1992. In my possession.

76. A big disagreement over tactics emerged during this march. Showing the same eye for an opening that had led him to take the Brooklyn Bridge, Veve wanted to lead us off the agreed upon route, to cause even more disruption and, probably, triggering a confrontation with the police. I pointed out that some people had brought their children along and argued, as we were heading up 8th Ave, that we should not lead people into a confrontation where there was the possibility of arrest if they haven’t been told in advance that this was a possibility. The police settled the issue by scooping Veve up, then releasing him after the march was over. A heated argument followed between the two of us. Shortly after the contract fight ended, Veve stopped participating in ND. ND and the TWU membership lost a valuable leader. And I lost the friendship of someone I respected and admired. It took us some years to patch things up. We should have discussed these differences within the group and established guidelines for future marches, but we didn’t. After a few years, though, Veve and I did begin to speak with one

proposed contract by a 2-1 margin. Every division in the TA — both subways and buses — voted no (Train Operators by 94%). Every MaBSTOA division voted yes (MaBSTOA Maintenance by 88%). The workers in the private lines were not covered by this agreement, so did not vote.⁷⁷

The question then became, what next? The union leadership stated an intention to return to the bargaining table. The TA said the contract would go to binding arbitration.

In late March, TWJC and ND called for a Day of Outrage on April 7th. We wrote,

“We are asking all transit workers to wear a red ribbon, or some red clothing, on that day to show our solidarity with one another. We also urge you to take whatever actions you and your co-workers think will dramatize how unhappy you are with current management practices and working conditions and that will emphasize your commitment to fighting for a good contract.”

Our fight with the MTA does not take place in a vacuum. Other city workers and workers in the city have been taking a beating over the last several years. Jobs and social services have been cut while those who have tried to prevent this have too often fought on in isolation from one another. We need their support to win a good contract. And we should offer our support in return.”

ND called for a rally outside the governor’s office on April 7 and urged members to attend a rally the teachers’ union was having on April 8.⁷⁸

In April, 1992, ND issued a contract bulletin titled, We Can Win A Strike. In it, we discussed the 1980 strike, pointing out, “...the 1980 strike should teach us that, with the right strategy, we can strike and win.”

This leaflet called for preparing for a strike, timed to coincide with the Democratic National Convention which was to be held in NYC in July. Many transit workers who may have agreed that a strike was necessary felt that a strike in nice weather would be harder to win. By targeting the DNC, ND acknowledged this concern, but showed how transit workers could still have strong leverage even when

people could walk or bike to work. It also made the assertion that both Democratic and Republican politicians were responsible for resolving the TA’s financial crisis more concrete.

Outlining what “striking to win” would require — ND called for elected strike committees, targeting the DNC in July, picketing all mass transit (private bus line, commuter rails), and not leaving a strike in the hands of the “bureaucrats at West End Ave” (the TWU’s office).

In late April, a new tentative agreement was announced. And so was the TA’s intention to cut off medical benefits if the contract was rejected again. The ballot was going to be worded so that you either vote “yes” to accept or “no” to reject and go to binding arbitration.

In ND, we had intense discussions on what to recommend. There was no confidence that the union leadership would lead a fight. The union was not prepared for a strike. Binding arbitration would be a disaster. And the TA’s threat to cut medical benefits would likely lead many people to vote “yes.” We couldn’t endorse the contract, but we also had a hard time urging people to reject it when we couldn’t see a likely path to a better outcome. We decided to urge people to write “None of the above” on their ballots, recognizing this would mean the contract would pass. It did, by a large margin. Few people followed our recommendation.

An article in HoW after the contract was ratified summed up the fight. It included the following,

“In the final analysis, we got stuck with the contract we did because Hall & Co.⁷⁹ were not willing to lead a real fight for a better one and, equally important, we, the membership, were not ready to take leadership of that fight out of their hands.... We have to continue what was started early this year. We can rebuild this union from the ground up by organizing ourselves in every barn, depot, terminal and quarters and by linking up across the divisions that the job creates and the union perpetuates. If we can do that successfully, we’ll have built a powerful force that can keep management at bay and regain control of the union for the membership. If we do that, this will be the last

another and discuss union politics again. We worked together as part of the coalition opposed to the contract after the 2005 strike and ran together on a slate in RTO in 2006.

77. A TWJC leaflet issued to riders shortly after the contract vote linked the workers’ fight for a good contract with the public’s need to prevent cuts in service. It called for taxing “the enormous wealth that’s based upon the existence of an extensive mass transit system”, pointed out the role the subways played in reducing pollution and traffic congestion and concluded with the call for “No Service Cuts, No Givebacks, No Fare Hike!” Higher Fares, More Managers and Worse Service, in my possession.

78. Our Goal Is A Good Contract, TWJC and ND leaflet, late March, 1992. In my possession.

79. TWU 100 President Sonny Hall.



At the height of *New Directions* in the 1990s there were rank-and-file mobilizations around the upcoming contract.

time someone shoves a bad contract down our throats.⁸⁰

After the contract rejection in March, Solidarity produced a leaflet that was distributed at transit worker rallies. It put the transit contract in the context of the broader fight against the, "...consensus that holds that working people will pay the price for the fiscal crisis in the city and state." It expressed support for transit workers and stated, "By combining your fight for rank and file control of the union with your fight for a decent contract, you have begun to unleash your potential to shut the city down. That is the key to winning a good contract and it is what big business fears the most."⁸¹

In April, Socialist Action, which also had a supporter working in *New Directions*, reported on the February and March protests, as well as the contract rejection.⁸²

What Were Other Factions Saying?

Every left group opposed the contract. *Voice*, the

newsletter backed by supporters of the CP, urged its readers to Just Vote No! in February⁸³. After the contract was approved in May, they credited *New Directions* for our role in building the 'No' vote. And, they broke with the union administration and called for a new union leadership.⁸⁴

The League for a Revolutionary Party's supporter, Eric Josephson, produced a series of leaflets calling for the contract to be rejected and for a transit strike "as soon as possible" as a prelude to a general strike. He rejected ND's call to target the Democratic convention in July and claimed, "...New Directions doesn't try to convince the membership of the need for a strike." He called for the formation of "A Committee for a Winning Strike" to push for a strike and a new leadership of the union.⁸⁵

In February, before the first vote on the contract, the WL called for its rejection. They also stated that "an alternative political strategy is need to unite workers in strike action, defeat the concessions and

80. Sonny Gets His Way – And The Members Get The Shaft, HoW #30, June 1992. In my possession.

81. What's the Big Deal?, Solidarity leaflet, April 1992. In my possession.

82. N.Y. Transit Workers Reject Contract Offer, *Socialist Action*, Vol. 10 No. 4, April 1992. ETOL <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/news-pape/socialistaction/v10n04-apr-1992-socialist-action.pdf>

83. *Voice* Vol. 6, No. 8, February 1992. In my possession.

84. *Voice* Vo. 6, No. 11, May 1992. In my possession.

85. Vote No — And Strike, February 12, 1992. To Keep Moving Forward We Have To Strike!, March 3, 1992. Let's Knock Them Down With A Strike!, March 24, 1992. Let's Strike To Win!, April 7, 1992.

roll back the budget cuts” and that “the so-called dissidents in New Directions put forward no such strategy.” They went on to call for the preparation of “general strike action”, “a break from the capitalist politicians of the Democratic Cuomo and Dinkins administrations and the building of a Labor Party based on a socialist program.”⁸⁶

The Committee for a Fighting TWU (supporters of the Spartacist League) issued a leaflet calling for the rejection of the contract, followed by a strike. Like the LRP, it presented a transit strike as the trigger to a general strike, “TWU Local 100 is in a position to lead all city labor in strike action to stop these attacks.” They criticized ND for the votes of its members on the Executive Board to extend the contract deadline and claimed, “New Directions wants to pressure Sonny Hall to pressure Jesse Jackson and the Democratic Party to beg the whole gang that keeps thing (sic) running the way they are.”⁸⁷

Articles in the SL’s *Workers Vanguard* between the two contract votes accused ND of being “dead set against a strike – now or ever” and of steering transit workers into the trap of binding arbitration. They also reported on a petition initiated by the Committee for a Fighting TWU for a mass membership meeting at Madison Sq Garden.⁸⁸

The MLP produced a series of leaflets under the masthead of *New York Workers’ Voice*. Their approach was quite similar to that of *New Directions* and *Transit Workers for a Just Contract*. Like other factions of the left, they called for the rejection of the proposed contract. They celebrated the march over the Brooklyn Bridge and called on transit workers to, “seize this moment to get organized against the sellout contract and against the traitor Sonny Hall and all his flunkies” and “to organize actions in our shops, gangs, and on the road.”

They took the position that, “transit workers cannot lightly decide to strike. But the actions and organizing we do today help prepare us for bigger battles ahead.”

After the contract was rejected in March, they emphasized the need to keep organizing on the job and holding days of protest on a regular basis. It was within that context that they addressed ND’s

targeting of the Democratic convention. “Challenging the Democratic Convention is appealing,” they wrote, “if we do not sit on our thumbs until July.”

They point out that “a successful strike requires preparation and organization. It means building up our confidence and momentum through a series of actions: rallies, marches, shopgates, pickets, slow-downs, work-to-rules, etc. All these actions further our fight against givebacks, whether they eventually lead to a strike or not.”⁸⁹

An interesting counterpoint was provided by TWU President Sonny Hall during a debate/interview held at the *New York Times*. Responding to Tim Schermerhorn’s remarks that the union should have been preparing its members for a strike, Hall stated, “The local is not preparing for a strike. We were preparing to win a contract for our members. We did not spend all kinds of time preparing for a strike. That’s easy to do. I can prepare for a strike in a day.”⁹⁰

1992 – 1996 Consolidating, Then Splitting

The events of 1991 and 1992 seemed to confirm the shared approach of the left within ND. Running for office to extend ND’s reach and elect division and executive board officers committed to a more aggressive approach toward management, combined with organizing on the job against speed-up, harassment, and for a better contract had generated a militant, local-wide fight around the contract that was built upon direct action on the job and in the streets. Following the ratification of the contract in May, 1992, ND worked to consolidate the gains it had made with little, if any, change in its approach.

There were important changes taking place, nonetheless. First, we decided that *New Directions* should become an ongoing caucus, not just a slate. And *Hell on Wheels* would be its publication. This marked a recognition that HoW had moved beyond being a project of the left and that it had become a true rank-and-file organization in which the left had strong influence. Second, a little more than a year after the contract was resolved, elections for delegates to the 1993 convention were held.

In contrast to 1989, when the ND slate won 10 delegates from the Train Operators division, in

86. TWU’s Ranks Must Reject Hall’s Scab Contract, issued by Workers League, February, 1992. In my possession.

87. We Need A Leadership That Wants To Strike And Knows How To Win!, February 11, 1992. In my possession.

88. *Workers Vanguard*, Nos. 548 and 550, April 3 and May 1, 1992. ETOL https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workersvanguard/1992/0548_03_04_1992.pdf and https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workersvanguard/1992/0550_01_05_1992.pdf

89. *New York Workers’ Voice*, January 30, February 12, March 2, March 25, April 21 and April 30, 1992. In my possession..

90. Transcript of *NY Times* debate between Sonny Hall and Tim Schermerhorn held April 14, 1992. In my possession.

Hall also stated that ND had a “special agenda of political hard-core, deep socialism [that] feeds on the pain and blood of workers, which has been caused by a failed Washington policy and a greedy, selfish management.” *Opposing Sides: Debate Within the Transit Workers’ Union*, *NY Times*, April 15, 1992.

1993 we won 41 delegates from the Train Operators, Conductor/Towers, Car Maintenance, and Line Equipment/Signals divisions. Six independents who were allied with ND were elected from Track. We had less impact on the convention than we had had in 1989, though. The incumbents were ready for us. The convention was more tightly organized and supporters of the administration were prepped to heckle us, shout us down, and call for votes before any discussion could be had.

At that convention, Local 100's Sonny Hall was elected International President. He resigned his position as Local 100 President and was replaced by Damaso Seda. Seda, a Puerto Rican, thus became the first non-white president of the Local.⁹¹

Seda then led the local in contract negotiations in 1994. He made improving the pension (which is set by the state legislature) his primary issue and won a reduction to a 25/55 plan (with an increase in the cost for transit workers).⁹² ND led a fight against the TA's demand for One-Person Train Operation (OPTO), that is, the elimination of Conductors from trains, leaving the Train Operator as the only crew member. The contract passed easily (although ND's core base among subway crews voted against it). The gains on the pension enabled Seda to win election in his own right in 1994, although ND's share of the vote grew considerably, with Schermerhorn receiving about 45% of the vote. ND won the division committees in Train Operators, Conductor/Towers (electing the first women to head these two predominantly-male divisions), Line Equipment/Signals, and Car Maintenance. Our allies in Track won, as well.

Seda could not bask long in his win. It soon came out that there was an additional cost, for medical coverage during the earlier retirement, that had not been revealed to the members. ND mounted a campaign to recall Seda and the rest of the executive officers. This drive built enough momentum that Sonny Hall sought to head off the pressure by giving Seda a job at the national union. He stepped down as Local president in 1996 and was replaced by Willie James, the local's first Black president.⁹³

Changes were taking place within ND, as well, that had an impact on the group's direction after 1994. Most importantly, there was a shift in the importance given to winning elections. This was driven by several factors. First, the increased number of division officers in the group created a constituency that was focused on what they needed to be good officers. In RTO and Maintenance of Way, they were engaged in constant fights with the VPs of their divisions over who would be released to represent members and whether they could spend time in the field preparing fights against management. Some of them, increasingly, saw winning the top offices as the necessary pre-condition for making any significant change in the local or its relationship with management.

ND's inability to have an impact on the 1994 contract talks, despite the number of members we had on the Executive Board, and the loss in that year's local election opened up a divide over the relative importance of winning office vs. building power among the rank-and-file. Where some of us saw the growth in support during the election as evidence that we were on the right course, that winning elections would follow organizing around day-to-day fights on the job, others saw the election results as a loss and a failure to take winning seriously.

The frustration over not winning, combined with the fact that some of ND's officers were more open to overtures from a Black local president than they were from a white local president, resulted in the first major split in ND's ranks when Corine Scott-Mack, the chair of the Train Operators division (she had also been our candidate for Local Recording-Secretary in 1994), after accepting a position on the Local's staff and (unsuccessfully) challenging Schermerhorn as ND's candidate for president, led a half-dozen of our activists from RTO to join the Willie James team in 1997 (more on this below).

The Left at the End of New Directions

ND grew throughout the 1990s by organizing on the job against rotten working conditions, campaigning for good contracts, and contesting union elections, winning more and more seats on the Local's Executive Board, as convention delegates, and



91. How little difference this particular change in representation would make was shown when Local 100's leadership called on the Executive Board to endorse Rudy Giuliani in his rematch with David Dinkins for mayor of NYC. They argued that Giuliani was likely to win and an endorsement would get the Local in good with him.

92. Local 100 members, like most state employees, had been able to retire after 30 years of service at age 62 (known as 30/62). They paid 3% of their earnings into the pension fund. Seda won an improvement to 25 years of service at age 55 (25/55) with an increase in cost to 5.2% of earnings.

93. The process enabling members to recall local officers was taken out of the TWU International Constitution at the 1997 TWU Convention.



New Directions activists Steve Downs, Tim Schermerhorn and Corine Scott-Mack in 1994. By 1997, after sharp disagreements over how officers elected from the ND slate would be accountable to the group, Scott-Mack had left ND and ran with the incumbent Willie James slate.

other low-level union positions. By the end of the 1990s, it was poised to win control of the Local's top positions.

From early 1999 to mid-2001, ND ran a highly effective contract campaign, achieved a long held goal of changing the way VPs are elected, and won sweeping control of TWU 100. And then it died. It came apart over how to run that contract campaign, whether or not to pursue the change in how VPs are elected, and what ND's role would be under the new administration. These disagreements unfolded as ND grappled with choosing a new candidate for president.

New Directions ended because its members could not agree on what role it would play once it dominated the union's elected offices. This would have been a difficult transition to make under the best of circumstances, but the circumstances within ND were not the best. Unlike the intersection of perspectives among a group of socialists that made HoW and ND possible in the mid-1980s, by 2000 the perspectives of key socialists had diverged. And, in contrast to the build-up of trust that occurred in HoW's early years, trust was smashed in ND's final years.

By the late 1990s, the composition of the organized left in Local 100 and in *New Directions* had changed significantly. Workers World had no active supporters on the job. The Communist Labor Party dissolved in 1993, to be replaced by the League of

Revolutionaries for a New America. I don't know whether the CLP supporter in transit remained affiliated with LRNA. In any event, they had no organizing presence among transit workers. The Spartacist League and the Workers League were, for all practical purposes, invisible. The League for a Revolutionary Party still had one supporter on the job. He told me in 1999 that he considered himself "an opponent of ND."

Within *New Directions*, Socialist Action and Freedom Road Socialist Organization each had one supporter, while Solidarity now had five.⁹⁴ The Communist Party still had a number of supporters in the Local. Two of them were now active in ND. The League of Revolutionary Struggle, the Fourth Internationalist Tendency, and the Marxist-Leninist Party had all dissolved. The LRS supporters no longer participated, but the FIT supporter remained active in ND and a couple former MLP supporters had joined it. They still considered themselves socialists, as did the few former supporters of the SWP and RWH who had been active for years.

In 1988, when ND ran its first slate, there were nine self-identified socialists in the group. Five participated in socialist groups and four were unaffiliated. Ten years later, in 1998, there were 15 self-identified socialists in the core of ND. Of the fifteen, nine maintained a connection to a socialist group and six were unaffiliated. In 1998, ND was pulling almost 9000 votes for local president; electing most of the officers in the subway divisions; and a few hundred Local 100 members were paying (minimal) dues to be members of the caucus. More important than the number of socialists remaining within ND, was the fact that ND had grown well beyond its roots in the left. It had become a true rank-and-file organization where the left had strong influence but was not alone in setting ND's agenda.⁹⁵

94. Most socialist groups, when they have several members in a workplace, a union or an industry set up "fractions" to provide a structure for these members to meet together, and sometimes with their group's leadership, to discuss their political work in the workplace, union or industry and decide on how to proceed. We did not. We were, at times, encouraged to do so. But a couple of us felt strongly that it would be a mistake to walk into ND meetings with a line all worked out and to vote as a bloc. Several of the non-leftists involved with ND had had bad experiences with socialists who tried to leverage their organizational discipline into control of relatively broad-based community organizations. We felt that by being open about our (Solidarity members) agreements and disagreements, we would help dispel some of the lingering suspicions about the left. Besides, we didn't foresee any discussions about strategy and tactics in ND that couldn't be held within the group as a whole.

95. This is described in greater detail in Downs, *Hell on Wheels: The Success and Failure of Reform in Transport Workers Union Local 100*. <https://solidarity-us.org/hellonwheels>

Different Strategies During the 1999 Contract Fight

The beginning of ND's end came during the contract fight in 1999. In the course of that fight, ND members repeatedly divided over what was to be done.

The first significant difference emerged when one

group in ND, centered around Track Div chair Roger Toussaint,⁹⁶ argued that ND should do nothing to implement a decision we had taken with respect to an important action by the Local.

Early in the year, TWU 100 President Willie James proposed a \$60/member special assessment to fund a media campaign in support of a good

96. Toussaint had many years of experience on the left. He got involved in ND in the mid-90s and had been ND's candidate for Local Recording-Secretary in 1997. In early 1999, he was fired by the TA. Toussaint had been written up for dismissal on a bullshit charge and, when he missed the deadline to appeal the charge, an arbitrator upheld his dismissal. Local 100's president Willie James planned on dropping Toussaint from membership in the union and removing him from office. ND members on the Local Executive Board argued that we should not allow the TA to define who is or is not a member and officer of the union. We won a vote preventing James from removing him until Toussaint had exhausted all avenues to keep his job, including in court. ND was also very involved in the "Reinstate Toussaint" campaign initiated and led by the Track Division committee. Toussaint was not restored to his Civil Service position until after he won election as Local 100 president and the TA negotiated a settlement with him.

The Importance of Assuming Good Intentions

I'M NOW A member of DSA, where meetings routinely begin with a reminder of the rules for the conduct of the meeting. These usually include "assume good intentions" on the part of others in the meeting. I admit, I can't always do this. But when I can't, I try to keep in mind that, even if I suspect someone's intentions, that doesn't mean that what they have to say isn't worth considering. Even if they have bad intentions, those don't invalidate their views. By focusing on what people are actually saying or doing, rather than assuming we know why they are saying or doing it, we're likely to have more productive discussions and healthier groups. ND's final years demonstrate what can happen when people stop assuming good intentions of others and, instead, assume the worst.

The differences that emerged during the 1999 contract fight were important. But they were clear differences over policy and tactics. The group could (and did) vote on them and act accordingly. However, the discussions and arguments about what to do were accompanied by changes in how disagreements were expressed that had a more corrosive effect on ND than the disagreements themselves did.

Rather than speak to the arguments of the people he disagreed with, Toussaint often focused on what he claimed their motivations were. For example, Toussaint had called for ND members

on the Local's Executive Board to boycott the Board's meetings until two of our members were restored to release time positions. I strongly disagreed, pointing out that then-president Willie James would be happy to conduct Board meetings without us present (there is no quorum rule, so our absence would not get in the way of the Board doing what the president wanted it to, it would just remove any witnesses). Toussaint responded that I wasn't willing to fight James. As the campaign — and our differences — built, so did Toussaint's accusations that I wasn't willing to fight or that I was looking to make a deal with the James administration.

This rejection of an argument because of assumptions about why people were making it, or simply because of who made it, became standard for Toussaint and many of his supporters. Marc Kagan, a former MLP supporter¹ and a close ally of Toussaint's, wrote in early 2001 that "there must always be room for legitimate debate" but then ruled that I was engaged in a debate that was "not real" and was, therefore, "corrosive."² And, in early 2002, John Simino, a founder of HoW, was even more explicit when he wrote, "I would accept those same criticisms that they print from a genuine rank and file group, but I feel their 'political' arguments stem more from emotional frustration than (sic) from true political analysis of the conditions this membership now face."³

1. This is an exception to not identifying anyone by name as a supporter of a socialist group unless they had been "very public" about their connection. Although Kagan had not been public about his support for the MLP while in transit, he has outed himself since. See his 2003 interview with Goldstein. Oral History of Transport Workers Union Local 100: Union Leadership and New Directions, Interview with Marc Kagan, 8/22/03, pg. 7. Transport Workers Union of America, Local 100: Sarah Goldstein Interviews Oral History Collection, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive, NYU.

2. A Comment on Steve Downs in five Parts, email to ND list and others, Marc Kagan, 4/2/01. In my possession.

3. Open Letter to Rank and File Advocate, John Simino, 1/12/02. In my possession.

contract for transit workers. Such an assessment needed to be approved by a membership vote. ND opposed the assessment because a) we didn't trust the leadership, and b) we thought resources should be devoted to organizing the membership to take action for a good contract, not on ads asking riders to support us. Toussaint, while agreeing that we shouldn't support the assessment, argued that we shouldn't campaign against it so that the members wouldn't blame us if the Local didn't win a good contract. Fortunately, a majority disagreed, we campaigned against the assessment and it was rejected. Toussaint argued a similar position, with a similar result, when the question of building a mass membership meeting came up in Nov. (More on that below.)

Although everyone in ND agreed that we should put forward contract demands and a militant strategy in an effort to influence what transit workers would consider to be a decent contract, differences emerged between one group, again centered around Toussaint (supported by the ND members who came out of the NCM and CP), who argued we should focus on what would take place at the bargaining table and that, given the number of Division officers and Executive Board members from ND, we could shape the negotiations and come out of the talks with an acceptable agreement. Another group, centered around Tim Schermerhorn and me, argued that, although we would work to have an impact on the bargaining table through putting forward contract demands, organizing actions on the job and pushing for ways for the members to have some control over the talks, the Union's negotiators were likely to come back with a contract we would oppose and we should prepare members to reject a bad deal.

In June, 1999, after an ND meeting supported the perspective of preparing members to reject a bad deal, Toussaint walked out of a meeting that was discussing contract strategy. With a few other officers, mostly from the divisions that worked on the tracks, he then tried to build up the officers, rather than ND, as the center of the fight for a good contract. This group organized three forums to tell transit workers why particular issues were important. Attendance at those meetings was quite low and, in October, Toussaint returned to ND meetings.

Going for a Seat at the Bargaining Table

Although the Local 100's By-laws state, "Each negotiating Committee shall consist of the Local Officers and the Chairs of the Divisions covered by the contract,"⁹⁷ no Local president had brought all those officers to the bargaining table.

In 1999, as part of his focus on what was taking place at the bargaining table, Toussaint argued that we should insist, based on a literal reading of that section, that all the Division Chairs be included on the Local's negotiating team and be present at the bargaining table.

We brought the issue to the Local's Executive Board and, when they refused to order Willie James to include the division chairs, ND took the issue to the members. We also went to court to enforce the by-laws. The judge ruled in our favor, but only to the extent of ordering that, whenever the entire negotiating team was present at the talks, the chairs had to be included. This left James an easy out — he never took the entire negotiating committee into the talks. But he would always have the chairs released to the union payroll on days negotiations were scheduled. This focus on getting into the room during the contract talks meant that Toussaint, and three other division chairs from ND, wasted days sitting around the lobby of the hotel where talks were taking place, instead of being in the field organizing.

Then, in November, the Local's Executive Board called for a mass membership meeting on December 14, 1999 (the contract was to expire on December 15). ND had been calling for such a meeting all fall. To the surprise of many in ND, Toussaint argued that ND should not take any responsibility for building the meeting. Instead, we should concentrate on building a march across the Brooklyn Bridge on December 15 that the Track Division committee (which Toussaint chaired) had called.⁹⁸ This fit with Toussaint's earlier effort to make elected officers, rather than ND, the central leaders of the opposition's contract campaign. Most ND members recognized that if we didn't build the meeting it wouldn't happen — and we wanted it to happen.



97. TWU Local 100 By-Laws, Article XXVI, (e)

98. The emphasis on different dates reflected different understandings of when the contract would expire. The contract's expiration date was Dec. 15, 1999. Based on past experience, many of us thought this meant that at 12:01 AM on the 15th, the contract would be expired. So, we wanted to focus on a big event — the mass membership meeting — before that. The march the Track committee was calling might take place after a tentative agreement was announced. Toussaint insisted (mistakenly) that the contract would be in effect until 11:59 PM on the 15th, so the march would serve as the last chance for a mobilization before contract expiration.

They also wanted to avoid a split over these competing proposals. As a result, ND members voted to build both the meeting and the march. In the event, some 8000 transit workers attended the AM and PM membership meetings at which a Local 100 VP read out an injunction that Mayor Rudy Giuliani had gotten. It not only prohibited TWU and its members from striking, it also barred them from even *discussing* a strike.

After serving us with the injunction and being yelled at by the members, the senior Local 100 officers left the meeting, effectively leaving ND in charge. At the AM meeting, Toussaint, speaking from the stage, urged members not to do anything that would endanger the union's "property or treasure." Tim Schermerhorn, on the other hand, speaking from the floor, made a point of violating the injunction by making a motion to authorize a strike — to which the members roared their approval.

Besides the injunction, there was a substantial police presence meant to discourage any action by transit workers. In the days leading up to the mass meeting, as the slow-down was becoming more extensive, cops were assigned to ride in the cabs of train operators who the MTA thought might be leading the fight. Hundreds of police were on-hand outside the mass meeting to prevent us from taking to the streets after the meeting. And, following his motion to authorize a strike, detectives were sent to arrest Tim Schermerhorn. The one who found Tim at work that night, tipped him off, told him "We want you to win," and then left to tell his supervisor that he couldn't find Tim.⁹⁹

A few hours after midnight, on December 15, Local 100 Pres. Willie James presented a tentative agreement to the Executive Board. All the ND members on the Board opposed it. Later that day, after the proposed contract had been announced, a couple hundred people, about half of them transit workers, marched across the bridge.

The 2000 Union Election

After the close loss in 1997/98, an increasing number of ND members felt Tim Schermerhorn should not be our candidate in 2000. Although I was not the only person to notice and object to Toussaint's attacking people he disagreed with, many

made excuses for him because he was seen as the only viable alternative to Schermerhorn.

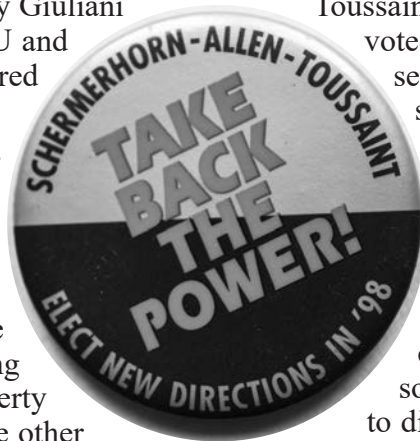
On June 3, 2000, ND met to choose our slate for that fall's Local 100 election. We were expecting to choose between Tim Schermerhorn and Roger Toussaint for president. When the meeting

voted that only the candidates themselves would be able to speak, I had someone nominate me so that I could say why I thought we should *not* choose Toussaint. I said he would make a good candidate but a poor president, because he "has shown himself intolerant of people who disagree with him." I continued, "As president, we need someone who sets a tone of openness to different ideas, who listens to a wide range of views and is not quick to condemn people who disagree with him. That's not Roger."¹⁰⁰ Not surprisingly, that didn't sit well with Toussaint and some of his supporters. A year later, Kagan was still accusing me of "smearing" Toussaint at the nominating meeting.¹⁰¹

The meeting overwhelmingly chose Roger Toussaint as ND's presidential candidate. Tim Schermerhorn was chosen as our candidate for VP of RTO.

With Toussaint as its top candidate, ND ran a different kind of campaign than it had in the previous two elections. Toussaint thought that ND came across as too radical for some Local 100 members. He wanted to tone down the message in order to pull in the extra votes that might be needed to win. He also wanted to play up the qualities of individual candidates and the good job they would do improving conditions for the members. This contrasted with the approach ND had previously taken, which was emphasizing the kind of fight it would take to make real change on the job and that the union's members had to be ready to engage in those fights. A seemingly minor, but telling, example of this change can be seen in the decision to drop the previous slogan "Take Back The Power" in favor of the more generic and less radical "Rebuild Our Union".

Although this change was made in the local-wide campaign, it was not embraced in RTO. For example, the primary ND piece used during the petitioning to get on the ballot was headlined "Rebuild Our Union." It promoted ND's candidates as "Real Leaders for a Real Union" and highlighted the good



99. Interview with Tim Schermerhorn, 8/21/19, p. 15, in my possession.

100. Remarks to ND nominating meeting, Steve Downs, 6/3/01. In my possession.

101. Email response to Report of June 6, 2001 Executive Board meeting, Marc Kagan, 6/10/01. In my possession.

representation they would bring.¹⁰² A campaign piece issued in the name of *New Directions/RTO*, where Tim Schermerhorn headed the departmental slate, included the following:

*“Electing new officers is important, but it is not enough. A handful of officers, no matter how committed, are not going to be able to make the TA treat us with respect. But a handful of committed officers, working with an active and determined membership, will be able to achieve a great deal.”*¹⁰³

This orientation was missing from the campaign outside of RTO. It may be a subtle difference — but it is surely a critical one.

Clashes During the 2000 Election

Toussaint and I disagreed over something else that had been fundamental to ND — the election of VPs solely by the members of the department they would head. ND had called for this since our first run in 1988. This had been a popular demand and with each election, as ND won more departments but the members were stuck with a VP who had lost the election in their department, more and more members felt the injustice of the existing method.

In July, 2000, the incumbents were split between two likely slates. Fearing that ND would win local-wide and take all of the VP slots, some of the incumbents suddenly supported the idea of election of VPs by department. They hoped to preserve a couple of VP positions in the face of the likely ND victory. This change would require that the Local’s by-laws be amended before the election.

To the surprise of many of us, Toussaint demanded that those of us on the Executive Board find a way to prevent the by-laws from being amended! He insisted we should not let the incumbents get away with holding on to a couple of seats, even if it meant going against our own position that the members should have the right to elect their own VPs. He said that, after one term when we had shown what our VPs could do, we would then change the way they were elected. I disagreed with him, as did almost every other ND member on the Executive Board. We supported the change to the by-laws when the Board voted on them. The members overwhelmingly approved

them in the subsequent referendum.

In late November, as the voting was beginning, Tom Robbins wrote a profile of Toussaint in the *Village Voice*, hailing him as the second coming of TWU founder Mike Quill.¹⁰⁴ I asked Marian Swerdlow, a founder of *Hell on Wheels* and a former Conductor (by 1999 she was no longer a transit worker), to write a letter critiquing the article. In it, Swerdlow wrote:

*“My purpose is not to disparage Toussaint or his contribution to New Directions. It is to clarify the relationship of the individual to the movement. The main problem with Robbins’s article lies in its perpetuation of the myth that working people must await the appearance of a “great man” who will redeem them.”*¹⁰⁵

There was nothing in Swerdlow’s letter hostile to or critical of Toussaint. She had made a point of waiting to submit it until it could have no possible effect on the vote (the paper came out at 11pm the night before ballots were counted). Nevertheless, Toussaint and Kagan, holding me responsible for the letter, called me a traitor and labeled Swerdlow “an enemy of ND”. They didn’t say what they objected to in the content of Swerdlow’s letter. Apparently, it was simply too much that she let some of the air out of Robbins’s inflated profile.

In December, 2000, the *New Directions* slate won a sweeping victory in the Local 100 elections. Roger Toussaint, won 60% of the vote in a 3-way race for president. ND also won the Secretary-Treasurer and Recording-Secretary positions, five of 7 VPs (including RTO, where Tim Schermerhorn received 78% of the vote), a majority of the Executive Board, and most of the division committee positions in the subway divisions, as well as several in the Private Lines. ND did not survive that victory for long.

Arguing Over Accountability: What Role for ND After the Election?

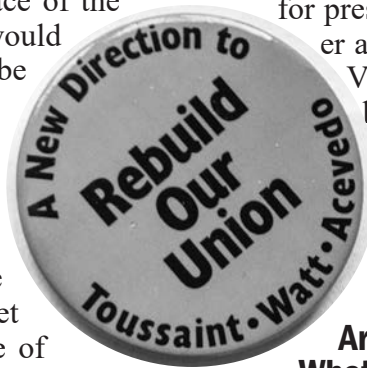
The question of the relationship between ND and the new Local 100 leadership had not been resolved before the election. It now became a pressing issue, one that contained the issue of accountability. Should officers who ran and won on the ND slate be accountable to ND? If yes, what does that mean and how do we implement it? If no, then ND will have a very limited role in carrying out its own platform.

102. Rebuild Our Union broadsheet, Oct. 2000. In my possession.

103. “When Will The TA Stop Treating Us Like Children?” ND/RTO campaign flyer, 11/6/00. In my possession.

104. Underground Rumbblings, Tom Robbins, *Village Voice*, 11/21/00.

105. Letter from Marian Swerdlow, *Village Voice*, 12/13/00.



This issue of accountability to the group was not a new one for ND. But some people's positions had shifted.

In early 1996, the issue had come up with respect to Corine Scott-Mack, the elected chair of the Train Operators (T/O) division. She was elected on ND's slate in 1994. After that election, concluding that Schermerhorn was not "presidential" enough to win, she was one of the first inside ND to raise the need for a new presidential candidate. She was aggressively courted by Willie James after he was appointed president in 1996. James offered to put her on the union staff. Scott-Mack wanted to take it and argued that the members who elected her wanted her to take it. In other words, she asserted that she was accountable to the members. We all knew James was trying to win her away from ND. I agreed with her, though, that having called for staff reps to be elected and having overwhelming support among T/Os, we shouldn't reject the offer. ND voted that Scott-Mack could take the staff position – while insisting that she be accountable to ND, that is, that she see herself as representing ND on the union's staff and that she discuss her planned moves with ND.¹⁰⁶

Toussaint strongly opposed Scott-Mack going on staff and the idea that, as the elected chair, she might take an action that wasn't first approved by ND. During that period, Kagan sent me an email addressing the stresses threatening to break ND apart. That email included this:

"Whose organization is it? What does it really stand for? Does it stand for going behind the back of the other members of the organization? Does it stand for doing whatever you please? Does it stand for calling yourself ND and coming to meetings when it is useful to you, but standing apart from ND and thumbing your nose at the organization most of the time? Does it mean coming in and badmouthing other members of the organization to their

face in the most unprincipled way and expecting that everyone will treat this as acceptable behavior?"¹⁰⁷

In 1996, Kagan posed critical questions. Unfortunately, he did not raise them in 1999 or 2000 when they would have been directed at Toussaint.

In mid-1999, Ed Kehoe and Peter Linares, two Executive Board members from the ND slate, accepted appointment to a committee tasked with working with a consultant on a PR campaign during contract negotiations. Toussaint denounced them, as he had Scott-Mack. They responded that they were accountable to the people who elected them and those people wanted them on this committee.

However, a few months later, a month after Toussaint returned to ND meetings from his effort to build up the elected officers as the leaders of the fight for a good contract, officers were giving reports to ND of how contract talks were going in their divisions. When it was his turn, Toussaint refused. After being asked three times by the meeting's chair, JP Patafio, he said, "That's not what I want to talk about."¹⁰⁸ From mid-1999 through the end of 2000, Toussaint made it clear that, despite his expectation of other officers being accountable, he would not accept any effort by ND to review what he and the Track Division committee did.

By early 2000, it was Toussaint and Kagan who were arguing — as Scott-Mack, Kehoe, and Linares had — that the new administration would not be accountable to *New Directions* but solely to the members who elected them.¹⁰⁹

In early 2001, there were three views within ND about what the group's relationship to the new officers should be:

1. ND members, including the officers, would discuss what the local leadership should do, take a vote, and the officers would be bound by this decision. Only two members (including SA's supporter) took this position.

106. Although she stated in open letters to the members (3/28/96 and 1/10/97) that, "I continue to be a member of New Directions and I continue to support its program," Scott-Mack refused to discuss within ND staffing and organizational decisions she made and left ND in early 1997, along with five or six others. She ran for VP on Willie James' slate in 1997, losing badly in RTO but being elected by the votes of other divisions.

107. Email to Steve Downs from Marc Kagan, Dec 1996. In my possession.

108. Recounted in Should officers be accountable to ND?, email to ND list from Steve Downs, 2/27/00. In my possession.

109. ND is hardly the first or only group to wrestle with the issue of accountability regarding members elected to something outside of the group. Elected officers and officials speak of being accountable to their constituents. That generally means that the voters will get to cast a vote once every few years. Progressives running for office often talk about being "accountable to the movement" or to the community. They rarely put in place mechanisms that will make that possible. Unions or political organizations speak of "holding so-and-so accountable" when that person has done something that displeases them. Too often, the issue of accountability becomes reduced to withholding support from someone in their next election. In ND, we tried, unevenly and (ultimately) unsuccessfully to establish a sense that we all had a responsibility to the rest of the organization to discuss what we would do and why we would do it. We didn't figure out how to balance the different layers of accountability that came with responsibility to ND and responsibility to the members of TWU 100. It's pretty clear, though, that if you pick a candidate who says they won't be accountable to the group, then you've decided against accountability.

2. ND should be used to say what the Local's leadership can't, for example criticize a union officer by name or advocate job actions. This was Toussaint's view and that of those closest to him.

3. ND would be a place where people with broad agreement on goals for the union could meet to discuss how to achieve those goals. This would have required the officers to be 'accountable' to ND, in the sense they would have to account for the steps they took to reform/rebuild the union and accept the fact that some might disagree with those steps.

There was no expectation that officers would be bound by any decisions ND made, just the hope they would be influenced. Schermerhorn, Acevedo and I supported this view, as did most of the people who thought ND should play more of a role than #2 allowed. Disparaging this proposal, Kagan labeled any officers who could be persuaded to change their views as a result of a discussion at an ND meeting "wishy-washy."

ND never chose one option or another. Nevertheless, a decision was made. Toussaint and other officers had made it clear that they were never going to agree that their actions would be subject to review by the group that put them in office. Kagan, who had once argued for greater responsibility to the group, now disparaged the value of holding discussions and trying to influence one another. A majority in ND accepted this.

Preparing to Take Office

By October 2000, with the incumbents divided between two slates, it was clear that ND would win and win big. At that point, a few of us said the group should start making plans for what we were going to do once we won control of the local. Toussaint said, no, wait until the ballots are counted, we'll have plenty of time then. (The ballots were to be counted on Dec. 14, 2000 and the winners would take office on Jan. 1, 2001 – barely two weeks, with a holiday break thrown in, to make plans.) ND never met to discuss and decide on first steps. That doesn't mean plans weren't made, though.

In the 2003 interview mentioned above, Marc Kagan described a meeting that took place in ND's attorney's office the day after the ballots were counted. He recalled excitedly saying to his daughter, (whom he had brought to the meeting because

he had no other childcare arrangements):

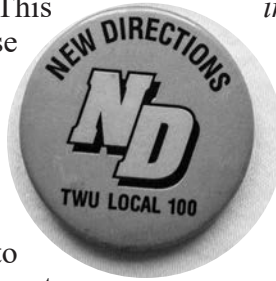
"Rachel, this is amazing, you have to come in and listen to this — he's got a plan, he's been thinking about this, he has an idea about what he wants to do in his head."

Kagan went on to explain to the interviewer, *"He wasn't winging it, it was so wonderful to see that he'd been thinking, you know, now a lot of the plan was wrong in the end but you know, the concept that he'd thought about, like what I would do as president and how I will administer was just wonderful..."*¹¹⁰

In October, Kagan had gone along with Toussaint's rejection of ND starting to make plans for what to do after winning the election. Then, in mid-December, he praises Toussaint for having a plan. That sums up ND's alternatives as we took office: we could meet and discuss as a group of long-time activists how we wanted to carry out our reform program, how to build a union presence on the job, engage in political action, fight to preserve medical coverage, prepare for a strike, etc. — or we could wait for Toussaint to tell us his plan.

N*ew Directions*, and *Hell on Wheels* before it, had been coalitions. Coalitions first of the left and then, as ND became more successful — and in order to be successful — a broader coalition involving union members and officers who wanted a more aggressive and militant (and some, a more democratic) union. Once Toussaint and a few others decided to short-circuit discussions by denouncing the supposed motivations of their opponents; once they decided that some of us stood as obstacles in ND's path; once they rejected the notion that elected officers should be accountable in any way to ND, they ended the coalition of the left that had led the fight for good contracts, for greater control by the members, and opening up the union to broader social and political issues meant the end of ND. By ending the coordination of those forces who had built up ND to the point where it won control of TWU 100, especially those who had a vision for the union that went beyond winning better contracts, they weakened the new administration as it sought to change the character of the union, win good contracts, and take up working-class issues more broadly. In doing so, they doomed the project for change that began in the mid-1980s.

It's not that Tim Schermerhorn or Naomi Allen



110. Oral History of Transport Workers Union Local 100: Union Leadership and New Directions, Interview with Marc Kagan, pg. 18. Transport Workers Union of America, Local 100: Sarah Goldstein Interviews Oral History Collection, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive, NYU.

or Marty Goodman or I had all the answers for how to “move from opposition to administration”. We didn’t. We had ideas, some of which were better than others. But that was also true of Roger Toussaint, Marc Kagan, John Simino, and others. The local would have been better off if those who were most committed to fighting the boss had been able to hammer out a plan together — and then work together to carry it out. Instead, Toussaint (with the backing of others) decided he was better off shedding those in ND who might disagree with him about the best way to build a class-struggle oriented union.

Shedding allies became characteristic of Toussaint’s administration. In early 2003, once the voting on the 2002 contract was completed, he fired Marc Kagan (who had served as Assistant to the President throughout the contract talks).¹¹¹ In 2005, he didn’t wait for the contract to be settled. He fired Acting VP John Samuelsen just days before Local 100 went on strike. The cause: Samuelsen and other officers from Maintenance of Way signed an open letter calling on Toussaint to hold off selling the Local’s building in Manhattan until after the contract was settled, to allow for a fuller consideration of the sale.

From Opposition to Administration

Although there was general agreement that we should put our differences behind us and work together to rebuild the union, no mechanism was put in place to make that happen. Toussaint repeatedly said that we had to “move from opposition to administration”. He was right. But what did that actually mean? We never had the collective discussions we needed about what that meant in practice or how to do it. ND was no longer a place where discussions of what to do and why took place. The Local Executive Board did not serve that purpose. It soon became clear that the only way to “show” a commitment to working together was simply to follow Toussaint’s lead. A couple examples show how that was not going to work.

Noel Acevedo, the Local’s new Recording-Secretary, came out of RTO, but not out of the left. He didn’t consider himself a part of either faction in ND. In fact, he hoped to serve as a bridge between the two. Toussaint pushed Acevedo away after he refused to accept Toussaint’s demand that he fire his secretary (who had been on the staff of the previous administration) and also resisted Toussaint’s interference in the Section elections Acevedo’s office was charged with running.¹¹²

Three Executive Board members from RTO (Clarence Little, Bobby Jimenez and I) were called traitors and accused of trying to form an alliance with supporters of then-International President Sonny Hall when we voted, contrary to the rest of the Board members elected from the ND slate, that Joe Pajewski and Eddie McLeod, two candidates for top positions who had run against ND, should be able to run for vacant positions on their division committee.¹¹³

Recruiting and Training Shop Stewards

Everyone in ND was committed to training a large number of stewards. We all saw the existence of an extensive stewards network as critical to strengthening the union’s presence on the job and rebuilding the union. But we had never thought through what, exactly we would be training the stewards to do or how the training would be conducted. Not surprisingly, there were differences on these issues.

Tim Schermerhorn, now the VP of RTO, wanted to start stewards training as soon as he took office. Toussaint told him to wait until the Local had its stewards training up and running. Toussaint wanted to use the training to bring stewards from different departments together in order to increase identification with the local as a whole. Schermerhorn wanted to focus on the skills they would need to lead fights in RTO. When Schermerhorn said he was going to start training RTO stewards right away, Toussaint told him that he could not use any facilities at the union hall. Behind that disagreement over timing were differences over the role of stewards and the

111. Kagan stated at the time that this was because he (Kagan) had told workers in the barn where he had worked before going on staff that he intended to vote against the new contract because it failed to restore a seniority system in his department. Despite his personal opposition, he produced most of the literature promoting a “yes” vote on the contract. See Car Maintenance Bulletin #1, February 28, 2003, issued by Marc Kagan, in my possession.

112. Interview with Noel Acevedo, 11/15/18, in my possession.

113. Under Local 100’s election rules at the time, a candidate for any of the top three positions or VP could not run for a division officer position in the same election. Pajewski and McLeod had run for Secretary-Treasurer and VP (respectively) on one of the incumbents’s slates. When they lost, two people who had won division offices in their division resigned to create vacancies. A majority of the Board took the view that the ban on running for both a local position and a division position applied to any elections in an election cycle (lasting three years). Little, Jimenez and I, arguing that the members should be able to choose who they wanted to represent them, thought the ban should not apply to vacancy elections occurring after the general election was completed. In 2008, Article XI of the Local’s By-Laws were amended to bar anyone who ran for any of the top executive positions or VP from running for a Division or Section office “in that General Election or within 18 months of the conclusion of that General Election.”

structure of the stewards program.

Schermerhorn wanted stewards who would be organizers on the job. He wanted to train them in how to wage class-struggle on the job on a daily basis. He wanted them to take initiatives to address problems knowing they would be able to count on the backing of the union's officers when they confronted management or kicked off a job action.

Kagan presented a somewhat different perspective in April. He wrote, "As we unfold the next step, our stewards training program – the two-way dialogue between leadership and members that will create the basis for power on the job – ND members who are not officers will take a leading role. They are the transmission belt who will carry our mobilization program out onto the road, the shops and depots and quarters and build thousands of activists where there are now dozens."¹¹⁴

Schermerhorn wanted stewards who would organize and lead fights every day. Kagan wanted stewards to be a "transmission belt" carrying out the leadership's "mobilization program." These are different conceptions of the role of steward and they require different types of training. They are different, but not irreconcilable. The fact that they were resolved through Toussaint's administrative command, rather than through discussion and compromise, showed the cost of the loss of ND meetings as a place to discuss the things we wanted to do and how we wanted to do them.

Debating the New Course in and at *Labor Notes*

Over the years, I had written several articles for *Labor Notes* about TWU 100 and promoting ND. The February 2001 issue carried an article I wrote about ND's win. In an article about the election and how ND built to the point where victory was possible, I wrote:

*"Ironically, the near certainty of victory in 2000 led many in New Directions to urge that the militant message be toned down – just to be safe. Instead of talking about how the union could be transformed to take on management – that is, by helping members organize themselves – some argued that the slate should focus on the financial scandal and present its candidates as simply more honest and competent than the incumbents."*¹¹⁵

I called this "backpedaling" and, even though

Toussaint had highlighted toning down the militant message as part of the reason for his victory,¹¹⁶ Toussaint and Kagan accused me of trying to undermine the new leadership.

Toussaint was a featured speaker at the 2001 *Labor Notes* conference that spring. He devoted much of his remarks to denouncing me, my article and *Labor Notes* for printing it. After his remarks, non-TWU activists at *Labor Notes* organized a panel for us to air our differences in front of supportive allies, in the hope we would then be able to move forward together. It was a welcome intervention and an intense discussion, but it made little difference once we were back in NYC.

Around this time, when I tried to get a discussion going about a one-day strike on the buses in Westchester, or concerning the Local's campaign to preserve health benefits, Kagan accused me of "...play(ing) into the hands of, and aid(ing) the enemies of real change in Local 100 and [of] developing a real system-wide fight against the TA."¹¹⁷

The Break Is Finalized

In April 2001, Eladio Diaz and Marc Kagan took the disputes in ND public when they cc'd parts of the internal arguments to broader email lists. Writing to those lists, Kagan stated, "...Steve Downs has written himself out of *New Directions* and now stands as an obstacle in our path."¹¹⁸

In early 2001, Toussaint's supporters among ND members in the Car Equipment Division asked Naomi Allen to stand aside to enable more new people to run for delegate to the TWU's fall 2001 convention. When she said she intended to run, a vote was taken and she was excluded from the leadership's slate. She then, along with other ND members who were unhappy with the new leadership in their department, began to organize a separate slate. She was accused of forging names on forms accepting nomination and those candidates were disqualified. Allen did not deny that she had signed the forms, but she was able to show that she had the members' authorization to do so. She was brought up on charges for the alleged forgeries, found guilty and barred from running. This was overturned on appeal to the national union. In an extensive interview on August 22, 2003, Marc Kagan confirmed that the real reason Allen had been asked to step back was simply that Toussaint had not wanted her to be part

114. E-mail from Marc Kagan to ND list and others, 4/3/01. In my possession.

115. "Insurgents Take Charge in Big New York Transit Local," Steve Downs, *Labor Notes*, 2/1/01.

116. "New Regime Faces Transition," Mark Daly, *The Chief-Leader*, 2/16/01.

117. E-mail from Marc Kagan to ND list and others, 4/3/01. In my possession.

118. E-mail from Marc Kagan to ND list and others, 4/3/01. In my possession.

of Local 100's delegation at the convention.¹¹⁹

Then, in July, Toussaint went public with his accusations against me and Naomi Allen.¹²⁰ After that, it was clear the two factions within ND would not be brought back together. Although important political and organizational issues had been raised, the dispute over what role ND should play had devolved into little more than a custody battle. Although we couldn't work together any longer, neither side was willing to leave HoW and ND in the hands of the other. The newsletter and the caucus had considerable political value which both sides hoped to continue to use and benefit from. Some of us also had a strong emotional attachment to them. In retrospect, we probably all would have been better off if we could have agreed to walk away and no one use the HoW or ND names. Frankly, though, because of both my emotional attachment and my determination that the caucus be more than a vehicle for winning office, if someone had suggested it back then, I probably wouldn't have accepted it.

Once Toussaint had made the divisions within ND public, Noel Acevedo, Naomi Allen and I began work on a new newsletter, *Rank and File Advocate*. Tim Schermerhorn soon joined us. The first copy was printed in time to be distributed at the TWU convention in Las Vegas that fall.

Shortly after arriving at the TWU convention,¹²¹ the delegates from Local 100 were informed that Toussaint, along with Ed Watt, the Local's Secretary-Treasurer, and Jack Sullivan from TWU 501, would be challenging International President Sonny Hall and the top of his slate. This had not been discussed on the Local 100 Executive Board or within *New Directions*. Despite the hostility he had shown to many of us, Schermerhorn and I worked hard to convince the delegates from RTO to vote for Tous-

saint in this contest.¹²²

At a meeting in January, 2002, a majority of ND members condemned those who produced *Rank and File Advocate*. They also elected a new steering committee and charged it with producing a new issue of HoW.¹²³ The quorum for conducting business was raised.

That January 2002 meeting was *New Directions'* last gasp. Meetings never again achieved a quorum because ND members on staff ceased coming to meetings. The new steering committee never produced an issue of *Hell on Wheels*. Disputes continued on email lists but, eventually, everyone accepted the obvious and stopped trying to keep ND alive to play a role in the local.

The Members 1st Slate

The election in the fall of 2003 was the first in TWU 100 in 15 years that did not have *New Directions* on the ballot. Toussaint headed the Toussaint Unity Slate, which combined the majority of former ND members with supporters of the prior administration. While some of the latter had become genuinely committed to the Toussaint administration, most had simply decided that aligning with Toussaint was the best way to get reelected and to advance within the union.

A different set of supporters of the prior administration (mostly those who had opposed the 2002 contract) approached Noel Acevedo about putting together a slate to challenge Toussaint. Noel, in turn, asked me and what remained of the ND crew in RTO and CED to participate in that effort. Joining that slate had me second-guessing myself more than usual.

For the first time, I accepted being nominated against Tim Schermerhorn and was chosen to be the

119. Oral History of Transport Workers Union Local 100: Union Leadership and New Directions, Interview with Marc Kagan, 8/22/03, pg. 25. Transport Workers Union of America, Local 100: Sarah Goldstein Interviews Oral History Collection, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive, NYU.

120. "Toussaint Takes On TWU's Left Flank," Mark Daly, *The Chief-Leader*, 7/6/01.

121. I can't write a piece about the role of the left in TWU in this period without mentioning an incident at the TWU convention. At one point, delegates came into the convention hall and found an eight-page brochure called "New Directions or Road to Ruin? — The "New Directions" Campaign to Take Over the Transport Workers Union." This piece combined red-baiting targeting Solidarity and Labor Notes with the shocking accusation that ND were "Bin Laden's Friends." Bear in mind, this convention took place a month after 9/11. Local 100 members had lost family members; had disobeyed instructions from management to skip the stations below the Twin Towers, thereby saving hundreds of lives; were among the first rescuers on the scene at Ground Zero; had been on the scene everyday since, and that Local 100 even set up a satellite union hall in a trailer near Ground Zero to provide a relief spot for people working on the recovery. The brochure backfired. Supporters of Sonny Hall from Local 100 stood up to criticize it and defend the new officers of the Local. The brochure was unsigned. Hall claimed he had no knowledge of who produced it or how it got into the hall. Eventually, it came out that it had been produced by a former member of the RCP, once an officer of a TWU local, who was on the TWU International staff. This same person had ridiculed the idea that International officers be directly elected by the membership when we first brought it up at the 1989 convention. To the best of my knowledge, he still considered himself a socialist.

122. Toussaint and his supporters had chosen to drop ND as their slate name and run as the Unity slate. In RTO, we kept ND and ran separately from, but not opposed to, Unity.

123. Report on New Directions Meeting, Marc Kagan, 1/22/02. In my possession.



Picketing at Kingsbridge Bus Depot, 207th Street Yard, during the 2005 strike.

Wikimedia CC

candidate for VP in RTO.¹²⁴ Although I fully supported Acevedo for president, I had big misgivings about being on the slate he was involved with, the slate that included many supporters of the administration that ND had run against repeatedly.

We had agreement on the need to ensure democratic practices in the local and the need to protect the ability of elected officers to represent the members who elected, barring removal from office under the terms of the Local By-laws. But no agreement on organizing fights against management.

Those I've described as "supporters of the prior administration" hadn't simply voted for people that ND ran against. They had supported the policies of that administration. They supported the contracts, and the givebacks, that we had opposed throughout the 1990s. In 2003, when we met to discuss what a common slate might look like, they didn't want to talk about the implications of those differences. The only administration they were willing to criticize was Toussaint's. (Our running mates in other departments got very angry with us in RTO when we put out a campaign flyer that included this paragraph: "Like Sonny Hall and Willie James before him, Roger Toussaint ignores the fact that democracy, inclusion, preparation, organization, and militancy all reinforce one another. Trying to advance transit workers' interests without strengthening each of these elements is doomed to failure. Members 1st will not make this mistake.")¹²⁵

In a meeting with the remnants of ND in RTO, I raised my concerns about some of the people on the Members 1st Slate (the slate headed by Acevedo) and suggested that we endorse Acevedo and Kim Hill (a long-time ND activist from Car Equipment who was running for Recording-Secretary) but run independently of the slate. This was rejected. People argued, correctly, that this would weaken Noel's and Kim's chances. At that point, my misgiving were still strong enough that I considered walking away from the campaign. But I didn't. I stayed on because, first, I liked and trusted Acevedo and Hill and felt it was important that there be a strong slate challenging Toussaint's. If we won in RTO, we would build the division the way we wanted to. Second, I didn't want a return to the policies of the prior administration to be the only viable choice offered to the membership. Third, and most important, I decided to stand with the people who had stood with me throughout the fight inside ND.

Come the election, Toussaint was re-elected with about 60% of the vote. Acevedo, Hill and I lost our races.¹²⁶ However, four of the 7 VPs on Toussaint's slate (and a number of lower officers) were defeated.¹²⁷ Transit workers were willing to give Toussaint more time, but they were not happy with how the local was functioning on the job on a daily basis. They took their dissatisfaction out on Toussaint's candidates for VP, rather than Toussaint himself.

124. Several activists in RTO told me they wouldn't support Tim and that if I insisted on backing him, they would withdraw from union activity. I agreed to be nominated for VP. I told Tim this was going on and urged him to bring supporters to the meeting when the choice would be made. At that meeting, a majority vote for me. Tim was asked to run for chair but he, not surprisingly, declined. Tim did not participate in the campaign after that.

125. It's Time to Move Forward in Local 100, Members 1st campaign flyer in RTO, Fall 2003, in my possession.

126. Socialist Action's Marty Goodman had supported Toussaint for president in 2000 but quickly grew disillusioned with him and was a sharp critic on the Executive Board. He chose not to run with Members 1st because of the part supporters of the Sonny Hall and Willie James administrations were playing. Around this time, the LRP issued another call for a general strike (For a General Strike to Stop Layoffs and Budget Cuts! 4/29/2003). Their supporter, Eric Josephson ran as an independent candidate for a seat on the Executive Board.

127. Initially, five of Toussaint's candidates were defeated. However, a re-run was ordered in the Private Lines, after it was decided that actions by one of the owners might have influenced the election. Toussaint's candidate won the re-run.

“whatever the fate of any particular struggle, the real fruits of the struggle must lie in the enhancement of the fighting capacity, consciousness and organization of the workers as a class.”¹²⁸

This was expressed by the Marxist-Leninist Party in 1983, shortly before some of its supporters got jobs in transit. It’s a position that most of the groups present in transit in the 1980s probably shared.

Over the two decades between the launch of *Hell on Wheels* and the 2005 transit strike, those socialists — whether supporters of Solidarity, Freedom Road, Socialist Action, FIT, the League of Revolutionary Struggle, or non-affiliated — who participated in building *Hell on Wheels* and *New Directions* clearly contributed to “the enhancement of the fighting capacity, consciousness and organization of the workers as a class” as rank and file activists and low-level officers from 1984 until 2000.¹²⁹

The new administration elected in 2000, now with the full resources of a 35,000 member local, continued to promote “fighting capacity, consciousness and organization” through the stewards training, strikes at private bus lines, and mass rallies in defense of health insurance. The fights many waged over workplace safety as rank-and-file workers or stewards led them to fight for, and win, breakthrough language in the 2002 contract protecting workers who object to unsafe work. But, as Tim Schermerhorn put it in early 2002, “The current leadership has done far more to prepare for this contract fight than the previous leadership would have. This makes us stronger. However, the lack of democratic discussion around strategic decisions in waging the fight and the isolation of officers and members who have led fights in the past weakens us.”¹³⁰

After 2003, though, their efforts to build up the local’s fighting capacities faltered. And enhanced fighting capacity, organization and consciousness, if not supported, can be lost or rolled back.

The 2005 strike demonstrated transit workers’s fighting capacity. But, in apparent agreement with Sonny Hall’s 1992 comment that a strike can prepared in a day, it was a poorly prepared strike,¹³¹ called on terms decided by management. It was, I have argued, “driven by a fear that the membership would reject both the contract and the leadership if there was no strike.”¹³² As Toussaint put it, “Our members would not accept a contract that was not the product of a strike.”¹³³ The strike resulted in a contract rejected by a bare majority of those voting.¹³⁴ The conduct of the strike and its aftermath — including Toussaint’s reelection (with just 44% of the vote in 2006, down from 60% in 2000 and 2003) — resulted in the demoralization of many active members.¹³⁵ The fighting capacity, consciousness and organization of the transit workers were set back, not enhanced.

The small number of socialists present in the transit workforce in the 1980s and 1990s did not create a revolution. They did not recruit large numbers of transit workers to mass socialist parties. They were not the cause of transit workers’ desire for better wages, benefits and working conditions. Nor did they create the members’ felt need for a more responsive and aggressive union to pursue that desire. They were not the reason members pushed back against abusive managers. But they did help to organize the fights that naturally flowed from that desire; that arose as members pushed back against management. This is especially true of the even smaller number of socialists who worked together on *Hell on Wheels* and *New Directions*. They provided links across divisions, informed the members of their rights, initiated job actions to highlight members’ power, provided a framework through which activists could come together and sustain the drive for a better union and workplace. They presented a vision and a practice of what a better union could be. And, over time, they convinced

128. Documents of the 2nd Congress of the Marxist-Leninist Party USA, Fall 1983, published in *Workers’ Advocate* Vol. 14, #1, p. 23, January, 1984.

129. Supporters of the MLP provided leadership in a number of struggles, especially over safety matters, in Track before the MLP dissolved. From 1995, they began to participate in New Directions.

130. “New Transit Union Leaders Encourage Member Participation — But Falter on Democratic Rights” by Steve Downs, *Labor Notes*, April 23, 2002, <https://labornotes.org/2002/04/new-transit-union-leaders-encourage-member-participation-falter-democratic-rights>

131. Like many active members, I was called the day before the strike by an officer in my division. He, asked what terminal I was working at, and then asked if I would go there early the next day and organize the picket line.

132. *Hell on Wheels: The Success and Failure of Reform in Transport Workers Union Local 100*, p. 51, published by Solidarity, April 2008.

133. Statement by Toussaint to members at contract meetings at the Brooklyn YWCA (1/9/06) and Bronx Community College (1/10/06).

134. The vote was 11,227 in favor and 11,234 opposed — a margin of defeat of just seven out of almost 22,500 ballots cast. Toussaint’s firing of Samuelsen and the alienation of the officers from his home department certainly contributed to that result by broadening the coalition calling for rejection of the contract.

135. For more on the strike and the few years following it, see *Hell on Wheels: The Success and Failure of Reform in Transport Workers Union Local 100*. <https://solidarity-us.org/hellonwheels/>

large numbers of their co-workers that that vision was attainable.

As a result of their efforts, TWU 100 members now directly elect their VPs. They receive a full copy of a proposed contract settlement (not just highlights) before they vote. There is now an annual membership meeting. But, two decades after ND first won the top offices in the Local, there are too few stewards, there is no stewards council, membership participation in elections has fallen (from roughly 60% in 2000 to 31% in the 2021 election) and there is little opportunity for members to participate in the Local's campaigns. In other words, some institutional improvements were won, but the union is no closer to being run by its members than it was 30 or 40 years ago. Despite some attempts during the intervening years, its relationships with community groups and environmental activists are weak, at best.

TWU 100 members still desire better wages, benefits and working conditions. They still push back against abusive managers. And they do so on the foundation of advances that have been made in the contracts since 1999. Whether a layer of class conscious activists will emerge — again — that can work together to organize and advance those efforts remains to be seen.

Can Any Strategic Conclusions Be Drawn?

How should we evaluate the success of the 13 socialist groups who were present in transit in the mid-1980s? Obviously, it depends on how we define “successful.” For a time, some of these groups measured their success by sales of their literature to transit workers. Supporters of most, if not all, of these groups served as stewards and were elected to the Local's Executive Board or as division officers. But, none of them succeeded in building a base of revolutionary or socialist transit workers. To the best of my knowledge, none of them succeeded in

recruiting activist transit workers to their group.¹³⁶

The groups that worked together on *Hell on Wheels* and *New Directions* built a caucus of rank-and-file transit workers that, over fifteen years, fought against give-back contracts, challenged unsafe working conditions and practices, resisted speed-up, defended two-person crews on trains, organized slow-downs, expanded the rights of Local 100 members within their union, and contested elections. Ultimately, they led a coalition that won control of TWU 100.

Supporters of every socialist group in transit participated in fights for better working conditions, for decent contracts, etc. Many earned the respect of their co-workers as fighters and representatives. Only those who worked together in *New Directions* built an organization alongside non-socialists that maintained a years-long fight against both management and the entrenched leadership of the union. In my opinion, it was only *because* they pursued strategies that brought them together in ND that they were able to achieve what they did. Without that caucus — and its commitment to building rank and file organization and fightback — they would have been no more successful than any of the other socialists on the job.¹³⁷ ■

“whatever the fate of any particular struggle, the real fruits of the struggle must lie in the enhancement of the fighting capacity, consciousness and organization of the workers as a class.”

A note of acknowledgement from the author:

I want to acknowledge my debt to, and appreciation for, everyone who participated in *New Directions* over the years — whether we ended up on the same side of issues or not. And, to these ND activists who have passed, most of whom didn't make it to their well-earned retirement — Tim Schermerhorn, Clarence Little, Charmaine Tolbert, Eladio Diaz, Frank Neal Whitted, Cecile Clue, Pete Foley, Linda Lilley, Mike Jerome, George Gaynor, and John McCarthy — rest in power. ■

136. Solidarity did recruit two transit activists as a result of its work on HoW, but both of them were experienced activists who were already socialists when they became transit workers.

137. Given DSA's self-definition as a “multi-tendency” organization, if a large number of DSA members get working-class jobs and begin organizing new unions, or rank-and-file caucuses in existing unions, the strategic differences that existed among the different groups in transit in the 1980s and '90s will likely manifest themselves within DSA itself. Figuring out how to function when some members focus on building rank-and-file organization to engage in daily struggles with management while others emphasize calling for general strikes, or some challenge union officials while others seek to influence them, will be a major test for DSA and its labor activists. The clearer everyone involved is about those differences and their implications, the more likely they will be able to find ways forward that enable them to advance the class struggle and socialist politics in the working-class while learning from each other and refining their approaches.

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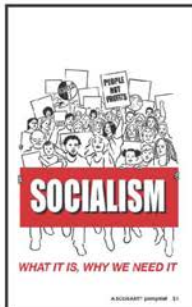
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