

# SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVE

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Teamster Rebellion  
80th Anniversary Supplement  
2014

## Celebrating the 80th Anniversary of the 1934 Minneapolis Truckers Strike Revolutionary Teamsters



The "Battle of Deputies Run," a turning point in the Minneapolis 1934 strikes.



A funeral for workers killed during the strike.

### Alan Jones and Ty Moore

This year marks the 80th anniversary of one of the greatest labor revolts in U.S. history: the strikes of the Minneapolis Teamsters in 1934. Led by socialists, this historic strike opened an era of unprecedented revolt of the U.S. working class. Over the course of the following decade, the labor movement would establish itself as a powerful institution in American society and utterly transform the lives of millions of workers for generations to follow.

In this special supplement of Socialist Alternative, we aim to familiarize a new generation of workers and young people with the events and lessons of Minneapolis 1934. We are especially hopeful that the workplace organizers fighting to unionize the low-wage service sector and the grassroots organizers of the 15 Now movement will study this material to understand the key lessons from 1934 and how to apply them today.

In this spirit, we welcome and draw heavily from the new book *Revolutionary Teamsters – The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934*

by acclaimed Canadian Professor Bryan D. Palmer, (Haymarket Press, 2014). It is the most in-depth and serious study of the 1934 Minneapolis strikes yet published. The book is an invaluable contribution, both to labor history and to the challenges facing the left and the working class today. In the face of a decaying capitalist system, as we enter a period of struggle and revolts internationally, the lessons of 1934 should be studied by everyone serious about changing the world.

### Why We Study 1934

After a decade of defeats and setbacks in the 1920s and early '30s, workers' power and unionization rates were at a low point. Organized labor was dominated by the conservative craft unionism of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The bad situation was made worse by the Great Depression, causing mass unemployment and dramatic declines in wages. By 1933, the pent-up anger of workers exploded into militant unionization drives across the the country. But nearly all ended in defeats, with conservative union leaders

incapable of defending workers against violent police repression and fierce attacks by the employers and their hired guns.

The victory of the Minneapolis Teamsters strike in 1934 showed that combative class struggle methods and mass, democratic "industrial unionism" could defeat big business and its allies in government. This stood out in stark contrast to the failed approach of conservative "craft union" leaders, who limited struggles to partial, narrow demands of the particular trade they represented, rather than fighting for the working class as a whole.

"In the end, an impressive mobilization of truckers' strikes led by American Trotskyists established militant unionism in a city that was infamous as a bastion of the open shop," writes Palmer. "Far more than merely sectional struggles of one particular industry, the truckers' strikes of 1934 were explosive working-class initiatives that galvanized the entire spectrum of Minneapolis labor – skilled and unskilled, unemployed and waged, craft-union and unorganized, male and female – and polarized the city in opposing class camps," (Palmer, pg.3).

The fierce class confrontations that unfolded in Minneapolis brought one of three major strike victories in 1934, all led by socialists, that "paved the way" for labor's historic upsurge over the following decade. Alongside the Minneapolis truckers, the Toledo auto-parts workers and the longshoremen in San Francisco proved, in the eyes of everyone, that unorganized workers, using the mass strike as their weapon, could fight and win.

These three strike victories opened the floodgates. Millions of mass-production workers in textiles, auto, steel, mining, and other industries got organized and won union recognition following the most titanic class battles in U.S. history. By 1937, this led to the emergence of the powerful Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

The events of 1934 are by no means the only historical moment when the genuine ideas of Marxism were demonstrated to be the most effective guide for workers' movements to win victories. It's no coincidence

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## 80th Anniversary of the Minneapolis Teamsters Strike

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that Seattle is first major city in the country to win a \$15/hour minimum wage. Even the corporate media was forced to acknowledge the leading role of Socialist Alternative and Councilmember Kshama Sawant in that struggle – which in the course of one year, transformed a slogan pioneered by a few courageous fast-food strikers into a reality for 100,000 low-wage workers in Seattle, amounting to a \$3 billion dollar transfer of wealth over the next decade.

The urgent need to rebuild an active, organized socialist base as the backbone for a resurgent labor movement is just as pressing today – if not more so – as in the 1930s. Indeed, this point lies at the heart of Palmer's study of the "revolutionary teamsters" of 1934. The book demonstrates, with impressive detail, the indispensable role of Marxist analysis, program, strategy, and organization in leading the mass movement in Minneapolis to victory, where other ideological trends in the labor movement failed.

Palmer writes: "The mass strike, and its highest expression, the general strike, thus revealed the capacity of American labor in this period to mobilize in combative ways, but also reflected the importance of Left leaderships embedded in the unions but quite different to the ensconced bureaucracies that so often directed rank-and-file actions within mainstream organizations," (p. 24).

The traditions of industrial militancy in Minneapolis can be traced



back to the early years of the 20th century. The most committed and respected workers in Teamsters Local 574 – those who led the strikes – were principled socialists and veterans of the class struggle. They had been expelled from the Communist Party in 1928 for refusing to denounce Leon Trotsky. They were internationalists, who defended the original democratic ideals of the 1917 Russian Revolution, ideals which had been abandoned by Stalin and his followers in the Communist Parties worldwide. After their expulsion, the supporters of the international "Trotskyist" movement in the U.S. formed the Communist League of America (CLA).

The Trotskyists were relentless critics of the bureaucratization and degeneration of the Russian Revolution under Stalin: "Trotsky and his followers were the first victims of Stalin's brutal machine of terror and repression within the Soviet Union...", writes Palmer.

### Marxist Strategy and Tactics

Palmer's study details the importance in 1934 of experienced worker-activists, deeply studied in Marxist analysis of capitalism. It was not simply a matter of countering the timidity and conservatism of the union bureaucrats with a revolutionary spirit and firm principles. These traits were essential, but they were combined with clear perspectives, an understanding of the strategy and tactics of the class struggle, and how to link the immediate demands of workers to a wider challenge to capitalism and the dictatorship of big business.

Palmer explains: "The Minneapolis Trotskyists ... exhibited an acute understanding of how most effectively to negotiate the many contradictions - political and economic, organizational and ideological - at play in the complex weave of relations affecting the local class struggle in 1934. This organizational

acumen was a product of the Communist League of America, whose leading members and secondary cadre conceived the plans behind the union-drive and developing strike strategy, implementing them over the course of the spring and summer of 1934. It led one teamster-militant, recruited to Trotskyism in the midst of these battles, and appreciative of what they won for the Minneapolis working class to declare: 'We couldn't have done it without a disciplined revolutionary party,' (p. 73).

The leading figure in the CLA, James Cannon, who also played a central role in the strike, explained that "in Minneapolis we saw the native militancy of the workers fused with a politically conscious leadership."

### Ultra-Left Critics

The critics of the CLA's leadership did not come only from the capitalist press, who depicted the truckers' strikes as "a revolutionary attempt

to create Soviet-style socialism in one city." Palmer also highlights the attacks of the Stalinist Communist Party, which attacked the CLA strike leaders as "nothing more than apologists for [Minnesota Governor] Olson's pale reformism, defenders of martial law, and misleaders of an instinctively revolutionary American working class," (p. 220).

Palmer answers these ultra-left attacks, pointing out that "Cannon and his Minneapolis comrades were attuned, on the one hand, to the necessity of militant, determined, struggle, and, on the other, to a 'realistic appraisal of the relation of forces and the limited objectives of the fight,'" (p. 220).

Summarizing valuable lessons for Marxists today, Palmer quotes Cannon on assessment: "The strike was understood to be a preliminary, partial struggle with the objective of establishing the union and compelling the bosses to 'recognize' it. When they got that they stopped and called it a day. The strong union that emerged from the strike will be able to fight again and to protect its membership in the meantime. The accomplishment is modest enough. But if we want to play an effective part in the labor movement, we must not allow ourselves to forget that the American working class is just beginning to move on the path of the class struggle," (quoted on p. 220). ☛

# Join SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVE

Socialist Alternative played a decisive role in pushing forward independent anti-corporate politics in 2013 with viable and even victorious campaigns. Since then, we have been at the forefront of the fight for a \$15 an hour minimum wage and the historic victory in Seattle. We've shown that Socialist Alternative gets results!

Socialist Alternative is the fastest-growing left group in the country, and we are establishing new branches throughout the nation. You should join Socialist Alternative to be part of this movement with such tremendous momentum. We can help you organize in your workplace, campus, or community and help you educate yourself in genuine socialist ideas. Email [contact@socialistalternative.org](mailto:contact@socialistalternative.org) and donate online to start discussions with our organizers about what it means to become a member and how to build our organization.



## "Double the Strength"

### The Women's Auxiliary in 1934

Palmer dedicates an entire chapter to showing the extraordinary role of the Women's Auxiliary. Overcoming the initial resistance of many union members in an entirely male workforce, Palmer describes how strike leaders countered this with an "explicit, conscious and successful creation of an organized contingent of working class women supporting the male trucking industry workforce."

Strike leader Farrell Dobbs explained the importance of involving strikers' wives in the movement: "instead of having their morale corroded by financial difficulties they would face during the strike," women should be "drawn into the thick of the battle where they could learn unionism through firsthand participation," (Palmer, p. 79).

Preparing for battle against the employers, *The Organizer*, a daily paper produced by Local 574 – the first of its kind in US labor history – wrote that "to involve the women in the labor struggle is to double the strength of the workers and to infuse it with a spirit and solidarity it could not otherwise have." Local 574, because of its Marxist leadership, was one of the very few unions in the 1930s (along with the Progressive Miners) that understood the necessity of organizing the women and making their organization "a vital part of the strike machinery," (p.80). ☛

## How the Strike Was Won

Early in 1934, the small Teamsters Local 574 – numbering no more than 120 members – struck against the Minneapolis coal yards. Led by a small core of socialists, the union caught the employers by surprise. The strike was timed in the middle of a Minnesota winter cold spell, and it effectively disrupted coal supplies essential for heating businesses and homes. The union quickly won formal recognition for Local 574 by their employers.

However, the trucking bosses, along with the Citizen's Alliance – the powerful business association that effectively ran Minneapolis – had long been hell-bent on crushing union activity. They took pride in maintaining Minneapolis as one of the most notoriously anti-union cities in the country.

The Citizens Alliance “dug in their heels and refused to deal with the workers except on an individual basis.” The city's employers “bought into the view that communism was running rampant in Minneapolis and the strike-action was tantamount to a Soviet revolution,” writes Palmer, adding that “the clash between the truck drivers and their bosses was shaping up as a titanic and irreconcilable conflict.”

Failing to win a contract, after selective strike actions in April, Teamsters Local 574 called a mass meeting on May 12 to take a strike vote against the entire industry.

### Building Union Power

Unlike the dominant “craft union” model at the time, Local 574 adopted an “industrial union” approach, admitting as members thousands of truck drivers, helpers, yard workers and workers from various trades. Any worker connected with transportation was welcome. With this approach, by May 1934 the ranks of Local 574 had grown to over 3,000 members.

The mass meeting on May 12 voted to strike around demands for a 40-hour work-week, overtime pay, wage increases, and a closed shop so that all workers in the industry would be represented by the union.

The mass strike began on May 16, affecting just about every business in Minneapolis, from departments stores to factories to groceries and bakeries. Not a truck could move in the Minneapolis without union permission, and the only goods such as milk, ice, and other needs of workers were allowed to be distributed. Writing about the strike action, strike leaders Farrell Dobbs, who had joined the CLA in March, explained the strike was “characterized by militant mass picketing from the outset... [and] was both audacious and efficient...Development and use of cruising picket squads

was an outstanding example of rank-and-file ingenuity.”

The key tactic employed by the workers to shut down the city was the “flying squads,” mobile pickets stationed throughout the city and dispatched through strike headquarters by telephone whenever a scab truck was spotted. Pickets guarded the major roads, stopping all non-union trucks.

Showing an exemplary degree of preparation for the strike, at union headquarters 10,000 people could be fed in a single day by a crew of 120, and there was a hospital with two doctors and three nurses. There were always 500 strikers at the headquarters able to be dispatched at a moment's notice. The ranks of Local 574 quickly increased to over 6,000 members.

The real power for running the strike was the rank-and-file elected strike committee of 100 truck drivers, which met regularly to take all key decisions. They reported to nightly mass meetings attended by strikers and their supporters. This approach of democratic unionism and mass participation, virtually unheard of today, formed the backbone of union power in Minneapolis.

### The Bosses Strike Back

The Citizens Alliance responded to the success of the union by calling for a “mass movement of citizens” to break the strike. They began enrolling “special deputies” to join the police in preparations to violently suppress the strike and break up the picket lines.

The famous “Battle of the Deputies Run” ended with 30 police sent to the hospital and a rout for the Citizens Alliance. This epic confrontation between workers, police, and the well-off “deputies” was recorded in films and pictures. Audiences across the country erupted in cheers and applause as they saw strikers standing firm and routing their well-heeled opponents to maintain effective control of the city.

The response of the Citizens Alliance was a huge red-baiting campaign against the “terroristic Communist-led” Truck Drivers' Local 574. The bosses gained some unexpected support from the conservative national president of the Teamsters, Daniel Tobin, who attacked the leaders of 574 as fomenting “discontent and rebellion”!

After several days of negotiations, the union agreed to a compromise to temporarily end the strike. They won recognition for Local 574 and pay raises for truck drivers while the other issues were to go to arbitration by the local

Labor Board.

However, when the employers refused to end their open shop policy, denying the union's right to represent all workers in the industry, Local 574 began preparations for another strike. In early July, the union organized what the press called the “largest mass meeting in the history of Minneapolis” at the Municipal Auditorium. Among the thousands attending were delegations from other unions, farmers' organizations, the unemployed, and left-wing organizations.

Addressing the massive audience, speakers called for the entire labor movement and all working people to stand with Local 574, explaining that all workers stood to win or lose in this battle. Miles Dunne, a CLA member and one of the early strike leaders, addressed to crowd to answer the red-baiting attacks on Local 574:

“They have now raised the red issue and accused us of being reds and radicals...of wanting to substitute a new form of government and I say to you here frankly...when a system of society exists that allows employers in Minneapolis to wax fat on the misery and starvation and degradation of the many, it is time that system is changed, it is high time that the workers take this from their hands and take for themselves at least a fair share of the wealth they produce.” The mass meeting endorsed the notion that “an injury to one is an injury to all workers from now on,” (Palmer, p. 141).

When the third strike commenced on July 16, Local 574 under the leadership started publishing *The Organizer*, a daily newspaper with a circulation of 10,000. Edited by James Cannon, the central figure in the Communist League of America, *The Organizer* countered the propaganda and lies of the trucking bosses and the Citizens Alliance, as well as explaining the union's strategy to workers across Minneapolis.

### Martial Law

On July 20, armed police opened fire on strikers in an attempt to break the strike by terror, injuring 67 people. Two strikers died of their injuries. The leaders of the Citizens Alliance were certain that the strike would be broken, but the reality was the exact opposite. The police brutality strengthened the solidarity, determination, and resolve of the workers. Tens of thousands protested the massacre, and up to a hundred thousand attended the huge mass funeral parade of Henry B. Ness – a 49-year-old father of four, a veteran, and

member of Local 574 for 16 years.

With the continuing upheaval threatening to engulf the entire city, Farmer-Labor Governor Floyd Olson declared martial law, calling in National Guard troops to act as strike breakers. At a mass meeting, the workers decided to resume picketing in defiance of the governor and the National Guard. Olson ordered the arrest of the top strike leaders and shut down strike headquarters.

The explosion of unrest after the arrests revealed the strength of a democratic mass movement and the elected strike committee of 100. Behind the central leadership were hundreds of rank-and-file leaders who had learned the strategy and tactics of the class struggle and who were capable of continuing the strike. “Despite everything the military tried to do... the supposedly headless strike was full of life,” wrote Dobbs.

### Victory

Pressed by President Roosevelt, who feared the labor revolt in Minneapolis would spread, Governor Olson backed down, called off the troops, released the strike leaders, and returned the strike headquarters.

Still the trucking bosses held out for two more weeks, backed by the Citizens Alliance. The strike became a prolonged war of attrition, imposing huge hardship on the union and the strikers. Finally, the strike was ended on August 21, with a mediated agreement that amounted to a huge victory for the union. Most significantly, Local 574 won the right to represent all workers, breaking the employers' hardened adherence to the open shop.

With the bosses' Citizens Alliance defeated, workers in other industries gained the confidence organize, transforming Minneapolis from a “company town” to a “union town.”

Across the Midwest and around the country, workers inspired by Minneapolis got themselves organized. In the following years, under the socialist leadership of Local 574, much of the interstate trucking industry was organized. This campaign transformed the Teamsters from a weak union of about 75,000 members nationwide in 1934 into a powerhouse of organized labor, reaching 400,000 members by 1939.

The Minneapolis Teamsters of 1934 serve, then and now, as a model for how a strong, rank-n-file controlled union with socialist leadership can gain mass public support and win decisive victories. ☺



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## The Way Forward for Today's Labor Movement

Tom Crean

Part of the significance of the 1934 Minneapolis general strike is that it won major victories in a time when the labor movement was ravaged by the Great Depression and years of bitter defeats. The AFL union leaders had utterly failed to develop a strategy and tactics to show the way forward for the hundreds of thousands of workers prepared to fight, particularly as the economy began to recover. Minneapolis Teamsters Local 574, under socialist leadership, showed that it was possible to fight and win. Along with the two other local general strikes led by leftists that year, it set the stage for the American labor movement's greatest-ever organizing drive.

Today, six years into the worst economic and social crisis that capitalism has created since the 1930s, the labor movement is likewise at a low ebb. In the private sector, less than 7% of workers are unionized, the lowest level since 1916. Over the last thirty years of neoliberal attacks, an unremitting drive by the ruling class rolled back the gains working people made between the '30s and '60s. This can be quantified in the massive transfer of wealth from labor to capital, the huge chasm between rich and poor.

Even in the more densely unionized public sector, workers' wages, health plans, pensions, and working conditions have been under attack. In some states like Wisconsin, right wing forces have sought to take away even the right of public sector workers to belong to a union.

Unfortunately, within most unions the leadership long ago foreswore the methods of class struggle that built the unions. They do not base themselves on the understanding that the bosses and workers have no interests in common. The leadership of the once-mighty United Auto Workers has for decades "negotiated concessions," to the point where many auto workers question what the advantage of being in a unionized auto plant is. At the very top of the major unions is a layer of extremely highly paid officials who are completely disconnected from the reality facing their members. Often, their salaries and lifestyles put them firmly among the richest 1%.

However, the problem is not simply a failure of leadership. Globalization has radically



changed parts of the economy and the composition of the workforce, posing very real challenges to building and maintaining effective unions. Class consciousness has also been thrown back, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also aided by the conservative labor leadership. One big difference between 1934 and today is that there then existed a significant layer of battle-hardened activists in the labor movement, whereas today that is largely absent. The activist layer is much smaller and less experienced now.

But, as in the mid-1930s, the talk of economic "recovery," while not actually felt by most workers, is emboldening many to want to push back. The Occupy movement captured this mood. In the last couple years, we have seen the heroic walk-outs by fast food workers across the country and the beginnings of a mass movement to win a \$15 minimum wage.

### What is Needed

Reclaiming the unions: Union activists who have had enough of the "race to the bottom" and want to take a stand need to come together to oppose giveback contracts and advocate for engaging and mobilizing the membership. To regain the confidence of workers, left union representatives should commit themselves to only taking the pay of the workers they represent.

In the recent period, there have been signs of ferment in a number of unions. In a number of local teachers' unions, insurgent

opposition caucuses have won elections or come close to it by promising a more fighting policy. The best-known is the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) in the Chicago Teachers Union, who ousted the old leadership and led an inspiring strike in 2012. There are also a few unions, like the National Nurses Union, with a more left leadership, which are helping to show the way.

Mass organizing drives: "Organize the unorganized" was the battle cry in the '30s and must be again today. There are millions of workers in manufacturing, retail, and infrastructure who could be unionized – but not by playing by the rules set by the National Labor Relations Board. The whole "labor relations" machinery is broken; it does not work in the interests of unions, if it ever did. Mobilizing for mass action and preparedness to defy the anti-union laws must replace the timid and bureaucratic organizing approach of most unions.

Reclaiming the strike weapon: The most fundamental power working people have is to withdraw our labor and deny the bosses the source of more profits. Today, the number and scale of strikes remains at historic lows. When the big industrial unions were built, it generally took strike action to win recognition; the second strike was to win a contract. It will take a return to such methods if rapacious capitalists like Walmart are to be pushed back and the labor movement is to be rebuilt into a truly powerful force.

Combining a political and an industrial strategy: At this point, large numbers of

workers do not feel strong enough to take on the boss in the workplace. This is, of course, true where there isn't a union, but it is also true in many unionized workplaces, especially where conservative union leaders block the road to workplace struggle.

In many cases, taking political action, especially at the local level, can be a more straightforward first step for workers to take. But to be effective, political action can't mean supporting "friends of labor" Democrats who, more often than not, have been promoting austerity and attacks on unionized workers. Workers need their own independent political representatives like Kshama Sawant, the socialist councilmember in Seattle, or like the independent candidates run by unions fed up with Democratic treachery in Lorain County, Ohio. Electoral challenges must be linked to building mass campaigns like *15 Now*, which played a decisive role in forcing the Seattle City Council to pass a \$15 minimum wage.

The key question in every social struggle is, How does it increase the consciousness of workers, their self-confidence and their ability to fight? Working people taking steps on the political field can then lead to an offensive on the industrial field. Once workers win \$15, why should they put up with ridiculous workloads, abusive managers, and wage theft? The ground is being laid for a resurgence of trade unionism in the U.S. Perhaps the greatest lesson today's movement can learn from Minneapolis 1934 is the need for bold, audacious action when the time is right. ☛