

Labor Notes Interviews Former Teamsters General President Ron Carey on the UPS Contract

— Mark Brenner

Editor's Note: In the first-ever direct election for Teamsters General President in 1991, reform candidate Ron Carey won a surprising upset victory over the incumbent old guard.

During his years in office, Teamster rank-and-file activists and reformers spearheaded a revival of Teamster organizing and bargaining power culminating in the 1997 UPS strike.

Carey was removed from office in 1998 by the federal government's Independent Review Board. He was later acquitted of all criminal charges and a multimillion dollar civil suit brought against him by current Teamsters General President James R. Hoffa, Jr. was dismissed.

Labor Notes recently talked with Carey about his thoughts on the tentative agreement between UPS and the Teamsters, the 1997 UPS strike, and the state of the labor movement.

Labor Notes: *I wanted to take you back to 1997. At that time you led a national strike against UPS which was probably one of labor's biggest victories in decades. What do you think of the tentative agreement that was recently reached at UPS?*

Ron Carey: The proposed contract is a complete sellout. It gives back to UPS monumental gains that the members sacrificed for and won in 1997.

In 1997 we stopped UPS from taking control of the Teamster pension plans, and we provided record increases. We made it clear that "Part-Time America Just Won't Work." We forced the company to create 10,000 full-time jobs by combining 20,000 part-time jobs.

That achievement provided for part-timers a sense of connection, a sense of belonging to something. It gave them an opportunity for a good full-time job. And it dispelled the feeling that they were second-class citizens.

That translates into a stronger union, when it's working for all the members. This contract eliminates new full-time jobs. And it makes new, part-time jobs a disaster by freezing starting wages and cutting benefits.

LN: *The next thing I wanted to talk with you about is probably one of the most important elements of the current agreement. UPS wants to move 44,000 Teamsters out of the Central States Pension Fund. What effect is that going to have?*

RC: Well, first of all, UPS always wanted to take control of Teamster pensions. That's not new.

If they succeed in the Central States, UPS will save billions by reducing their pension contributions. Teamster members will pay the price for that, with weaker pensions, company dominated plans, now and in the future.

For example, under the contract the 30 and out benefit in the Central States will be \$3,000 per month in 2013. That's the same benefit level we won in 1997. What they're doing is freezing the benefit at the 1997 level, and that represents a 16-year freeze.

Let's face it, the cost of living is going up. And if you're not moving forward, you're falling behind.

LN: *A lot of concessions in the contract target new hires, like eliminating medical benefits for new part-timers. What effect does that have on union solidarity?*

RC: It will create enormous divisions between part-times, full-timers, and the future generations of Teamsters.

Selling out one group of Teamsters against another is not a new concept. It keeps the members fighting amongst themselves, as opposed to holding the union leadership accountable.

In Local 804 in New York, where I'm from, they want to eliminate the "25 Year and Out" pension plan for new hires. The union officers who negotiated this rip-off know that the "25 Year and Out" pension benefit was something we fought for and won 25 years ago. And it took a 13-week strike to do it.

This has been a vital benefit for our members for 25 years. The elimination of the benefit for Local 804 members is incredible—union officers selling out the future. And they know they won't be around to answer for their deal-making.

I know Local 804 members won't be fooled by the union and its propaganda, about how good this contract is, and why they are not to blame for this sellout.

Maybe the members should give some consideration to some union by-law changes that provide for part-time union officers with frozen benefits and frozen wages.

I'm confident that 804 members will vote "no" on the national agreement and the local supplement. They have the power and they have the courage to vote down the

supplement and the national agreement, and send these phony negotiators back to the bargaining table to make it right for the members.

LN: *One thing that puzzles me—how do you explain these enormous concessions? It's not like UPS is hurting. The company made more than \$4 billion in profit last year.*

RC: Well that's right. The money is there, and the union has the leverage at UPS. But the current union leadership is not interested or concerned about the members needs.

In 1997 our strategy was to build strength and unity by mobilizing, by keeping the members informed about everything that was going on. When UPS tried to ram down a sweetheart deal, Teamster members stood courageous. And the public supported us, because we were standing strong on issues that touch all Americans.

In contrast, this year Hoffa and Hall followed the "good old boy" strategy. They kept the members in the dark. They kept the public in the dark.

Instead of going on the offensive and mobilizing to win, Hoffa and Hall sat down to play "Let's Make a Deal." They traded away hard won contract rights, pension benefits, full-time jobs, for some left over crumbs.

LN: *As we speak contract ratification ballots are being mailed out to UPS teamsters. What do you think is going to happen?*

RC: The fate of this contract is in the hands of the members. It's their job to reach out to the brothers and sisters and explain two simple facts.

The union did not force UPS to put its best offer on the table.

And the membership has a right and the power to vote "no" and to send the negotiators back to the bargaining table to win a fair contract that benefits all of the members. Fortunately UPS teamsters don't have to start from square one.

They already have a national network in place, Teamsters for a Democratic Union. And they were vital in the 1997 strike. I could always count on them to get information out to the members.

LN: *Looking at the Teamsters, and the labor movement as a whole. What gives you hope today?*

RC: Your magazine Labor Notes talks about "Putting movement back in the labor movement." I agree with that. Major challenges are ahead of us. The labor movement has to grow.

But you can not attract new members when you're selling out the ones you have. I also know that when union leaders forget where they came, and aren't doing the job, history has shown that members will fight for change.

When I look at the Teamsters union, I see members trying to fight back in the union. They're organizing in their local unions. They're fighting to defend pensions and benefits. They're holding the union leadership's feet to the fire.

The American Dream is under attack. Good jobs, healthcare, pensions, contract rights are the target. But I have seen the strength and determination of Teamsters when they are asked to stand up and be counted.

Their unity and courage gives me a great deal of hope and inspiration for the future.

Taken from <http://www.labornotes.org/node/1439>