
LABOR PERISCOPE

Teamsters brace for strike, weigh options

As of March 28, the negotiations in Arlington, Va. between the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the trucking industry on the terms of a new master freight agreement appear hopelessly deadlocked. No one close to the talks feels that an agreement before the present contract expires March 31 is possible.

The IBT executive is weighing strike strategy. They are looking at three options: a nationwide strike; a selective strike against certain companies, while holding open the threat of a national strike; and stopping the clock to allow negotiations to proceed further. Contrary to reports in the media, the IBT executive, as of mid-week, had made no firm decision and was waiting to see the trucking industry's next offer. The first offer made before the union strike votes was below the 7 percent guideline and was promptly rejected. The Teamsters have made no new offer since their demand for a three-year wage and benefit package in excess of 50 percent, well above the Carter guidelines, which was proposed two weeks ago.

Discussions are also taking place about the need for a political mobilization against the Carter austerity program.

Teamster master freight locals voted overwhelmingly to authorize their International Executive Board to call a strike. A survey of the strike vote meetings finds Teamsters low-keyed and serious — and ready to fight. They back their union leadership's unwillingness to knuckle under to the Carter wage-price

austerity guidelines and want their rights and benefits secured under the 12 years of master freight agreements protected.

Reports from the locals indicate that the Teamster members have no stomach for the antileadership provocations of the handful of members of the dissident groupings, PROD, Inc. and Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). PROD-TDU literature litters the ground around Detroit's Cobo Hall, where Local 299 meets. Charges by Local 299-based TDU leader Pete Camarata, given wide circulation by the *New York Times*, that Teamsters are ready to "rebel" against the "sell-out" leadership of IBT President Frank Fitzsimmons, are proven baseless by the strike meetings.

Lawyers for the Teamsters, meanwhile, filed suit in Federal court in Washington to obtain testimony from government officials to show that a possible Teamster strike would not constitute ground for granting a Taft-Hartley back to work injunction. The suit was dismissed the next day. The suit also charged that meddling by Carter Administration officials had stymied efforts to reach a settlement (see above for how Carter Administration is responsible for forcing a strike).

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A bad deal on dereg

Five key shipping groups assembled in Washington D.C. last week to

begin what the American Trucking Assn. termed its "offensive against deregulation." The shippers attacked the legislation proposed by Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass) that would withdraw the antitrust exemption that allows truckers to jointly set rates. Industry spokesmen term deregulation a far greater threat than current Teamster wage demands.

But the industry and the Teamsters union may be in for a shock. Last week both seemed relieved that Kennedy and his Judiciary Committee lost a jurisdictional fight with Sen. Howard Cannon (D-Nev), who heads the Commerce Committee, on who will handle the deregulation legislation. The truckers and Teamsters both feel Cannon "will take the steam out of Kennedy's push."

But Kennedy people are privately very happy about what has transpired. They say that they counted their votes and knew they would lose a floor fight. So they dealt with Cannon's people. Kennedy's crew claims that they have "a gentleman's agreement" to put through a deregulation bill and say Cannon will give Kennedy considerable leeway. "A floor fight would have hurt our chances," said a top Kennedy aide. "Now we'll be able to put through some kind of bill with the broadest possible support."

Kennedy people also claim they have "iron clad" assurances from Alfred Kahn, Carter's inflation czar, that no matter what he promises the Teamsters and trucking industry in private, the Administration remains committed to deregulation as a "cornerstone" of the "anti-inflation" program.

Despite this bluster and the deal, Washington observers don't expect much action this year on trucking deregulation. They expect the Interstate Commerce Commission and Kennedy ally Dan O'Neill to carry the ball, for the time being.