

TEAMSTER REBELLION

F A R R E L L D O B B S



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COVER DESIGN: Eva Braiman

Pathfinder

www.pathfinderpress.com

E-mail: pathfinder@pathfinderpress.com

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPANISH EDITION

by Jack Barnes

It was graveyard shift on the picket line near the entrance to the Co-Op coal mine outside Huntington, Utah. In mid-October, nights are already cold in the mountains. The icy blasts of wind through Bear Canyon cut to the bone. The locked-out workers had tied down their picket shack, made of plywood and blue tarp, to keep it from taking flight. Inside seven or eight miners—most in their twenties, plus a couple of old-timers, including a woman and a veteran in his fifties, almost all from the state of Sinaloa in Mexico—huddled around the wood stove, donated by a retired union miner from nearby East Carbon.

A month earlier the company had fired seventy-four miners for protesting the suspension of a fellow worker and union supporter who had refused to sign a disciplinary warning. Acting to crush the miners' effort to organize to win recognition of the United Mine Workers of America, management then locked them out.

One of the miners in the picket shack was a Nicaraguan immigrant who worked in the Deserado mine in western Colorado, several hours away. He had gotten union time off to come over and help out. Before leaving home, he had stuck in his pocket a well-worn copy of *Teamster Rebellion*, the story of a bloody, hard-fought union organizing battle that took place almost seventy years ago in Minnesota, carried out by workers many of whom were Scandinavian in origin—Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, or

Danish—with a substantial mixture of Irish. The author, Farrell Dobbs, whose forebears came from Ireland, had become the youngest leader of that strike. Like so many others facing Depression conditions in the early 1930s, Farrell had been struggling to find steady work, feed his family, and pay the rent.

The Nicaraguan miner, Francisco, began reading a few of the opening pages aloud, sight translating into Spanish as he went. The paragraphs described the working and living conditions and wages in the Midwest at the depth of the Depression. Amid expressions of surprise and sympathy, the strikers asked for more of the story, and soon were listening to other passages, page after page. The account was interrupted only to check the occasional late-night car going by, or to replenish firewood and survey the area outside.

Above all, the men and women from Sinaloa, trying to make their lives in the mountains of Utah, identified with the individual struggles of the men and women of *Teamster Rebellion*. Dobbs's description in the book's early pages of how his family lost their entire winter's stock of canned vegetables and fruits one night when the weather suddenly dropped below freezing and they didn't make it home in time to move the jars indoors elicited expressions of sympathy and understanding of what that blow must have meant for Farrell, his wife Marvel, and their children.

The photos of strikers battling the cops and bosses' deputies, of the large, disciplined funeral cortege for one of the pickets gunned down in cold blood by the cops, of strike leaders being hauled away to jail by the National Guard—all were looked at with interest. When the miners learned that inside the Teamster strike headquarters they were seeing in the photos there was a round-the-clock commissary for meals and a hospital to treat the wounded,

interest grew. And after discovering from Dobbs's narrative how the drivers organized in the Minneapolis market square to beat back the cop and employer assaults—with courage, discipline, and above all a detailed battle plan—and went on to *win* the strike for union recognition, the pictures were studied with even more attention.

Few proletarian scenes underscore better the value of the publication of *Rebelión Teamster*, the first Spanish translation of *Teamster Rebellion*, some thirty-two years after it first appeared in English.

It is possible that among the striking Minneapolis Teamsters who laid the foundations for the transformation of the labor movement throughout the entire Midwest in the 1930s there was not a single worker who had been born in Mexico. (What a change a few decades have wrought!) But across the span of years, nationalities, languages, and lifetime experiences, the story told in *Teamster Rebellion* also belongs to the growing ranks of Spanish-speaking workers in the United States today as they enter into struggle. They can see themselves in those earlier generations of workers—many of them likewise first- or second-generation immigrants—who finally said “enough,” and began to take their own future in hand.



Teamster Rebellion is a book that stands on its own. It tells a hell of a story. It is at the same time an introduction to Farrell Dobbs, the worker in his twenties who emerged in the course of those battles as a leader of his class.

He was twenty-five years old, with two children to support, when he turned his back on a secure and well-rewarded future as part of the supervisory personnel of Western Electric working out of Omaha, Nebraska. He

was repelled by the horror of the person he would have to become, by the class values and attitudes he would have to adopt, if he sold his soul to stay in such a job. Without a backward glance, he unconditionally cut himself “adrift” from alien classes, as the *Communist Manifesto* puts it, and “joined the revolutionary class” in the fullest sense of the word. The “miserable halfness” of the petty-bourgeois spirit was the class attribute Dobbs came most to despise.

He quickly found himself in the ranks of the “great army of the unemployed.” Shoveling coal a couple of years later in a Minneapolis coal yard, he met Grant Dunne, a seasoned cadre of the Communist League of America, the forerunner of the Socialist Workers Party, who enlisted him in a union organizing drive. The story unfolds from there through the pages of *Teamster Rebellion* and the subsequent volumes, *Teamster Power*, *Teamster Politics*, and *Teamster Bureaucracy*, as well as numerous pamphlets, booklets, and the two volumes of *Revolutionary Continuity: Marxist Leadership in the U.S.* that Dobbs was to live to complete in the early 1980s: *The Early Years, 1848–1917*, and *Birth of the Communist Movement, 1918–1922*.

As his political awakening unfolded, Dobbs became a citizen of the world, a proletarian internationalist, living the present as part of history—apart from which communism does not exist. He describes the impact on him of pictures in the Omaha newspapers of Imperial Japan’s 1931 invasion of China. The photos showed scenes of U.S. troops stationed in Shanghai protecting, with Tokyo’s assent, the wealthy “international settlement,” while nearby Chinese working-class districts, with a casual racist nod from the U.S. army brass, were devastated, often burned to the ground, and their inhabitants slaughtered by the Japanese imperialist forces.

In describing his developing class consciousness, Dobbs gives the news photos of those events a weight similar to the impact on him of being asked by his bosses to go along with the firing of a fellow worker a few months short of retirement and a pension, in order to cut costs and increase “productivity.” In the later volumes of the Teamster series, we see the newspaper of the Teamsters Joint Council in Minneapolis, the *Northwest Organizer*, carrying lead editorials demanding the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Asia and the Pacific and condemning preparations by the administration of President Franklin Roosevelt for the great imperialist slaughter of World War II.

The young Farrell Dobbs we get to know in the pages of *Teamster Rebellion* became one of the great mass organizers of the U. S. working class. Barely thirty, he was the chief architect and leader of the campaign—stretching from Texas, to Detroit, to Canada, to Seattle—that organized some quarter million over-the-road drivers into a powerful union and transformed the upper Midwest into union territory, the legacy of which is felt to this day.

The leading cadre of General Drivers Local 574 (later Teamsters Local 544) became the class-struggle left-wing of a much broader militant labor leadership. They showed in practice how the unions, equipped with such leadership, can and will be transformed into instruments of revolutionary struggle capable of leading growing layers of workers, employed and unemployed, and their allies—farmers, devastated small producers—to political independence from the ruling class. They showed how class-conscious union militants begin to recognize themselves as part of an international class whose interests are diametrically opposed to those of their own bosses and the bosses’ government. And to rest easy in the history they are a living part of.

Dobbs more than anyone, however, knew that what he

was accomplishing was possible only because he was part of the broad leadership cadre of the communist party founded in 1919 to do in the United States what the Bolsheviks had just done in Russia, the party that in 1938 took the name Socialist Workers Party. By 1940, with World War II fast approaching, reaction was growing in the trade union officialdom, the ranks were being prepared for war, and the prospect of further political progress either in the Teamsters or the wider industrial union movement had been virtually eliminated for the time being. In January of that year, Dobbs resigned his post as general organizer for the Teamsters international. He did so to become labor and organization secretary of a party whose membership, under the impact of the labor movement's retreat and the petty bourgeoisie's capitulation to patriotic hysteria, would soon drop well below 1,000. The next year the leadership of that party that would not bend to war pressures and many cadres of Local 544's combat, including Dobbs himself, would be indicted on conspiracy and sedition charges, convicted, and sent to prison by federal prosecutors making the first use of the soon-to-become-infamous Smith "Gag" Act—an earlier ruling-class application of "homeland security."

It was as a party man, especially shouldering responsibility as a national officer of the Socialist Workers Party for almost three decades, the majority of that time as national secretary, that Dobbs made his greatest leadership contributions—setting an example of working-class integrity from prison during World War II; charting an unwavering communist course for party cadres in the unions and in political action through the postwar witch-hunt; encouraging by word and deed the communist and labor movements to join in the mass proletarian fight for Black rights; helping lead the party in responding to and

embracing the Cuban Revolution as its own; collaborating in mapping a military policy for the proletariat carried out by young socialists within the broad movement opposing U.S. imperialism's war in Vietnam; and actively pursuing the recruitment of a new generation of cadres that grew out of these momentous world political events.

Dobbs helped lead the communist movement through the retreat and decline of the labor movement from the late 1940s through the mid-1970s. He gave unstinting support and counsel to the younger party cadres who, in the latter seventies, led a turn to the unions as new struggles and openings developed, beginning in the coal mines and steel plants especially, and organized the party to respond as proletarian internationalists to triumphant revolutions in Nicaragua, Grenada, and Iran.

From World War II to Korea to Vietnam, Dobbs oriented the movement to reach toward our fellow workers in uniform, the GIs, those U.S. residents who pay the highest price of all for Washington's unending quest for world dominance. And he helped politically arm communist workers and youth to unflinchingly recognize the inevitable necessity of organizing to combat and defeat intensified state repression, forms of military rule, and capitalist-sponsored fascist gangs as the imperialist order in the United States—through unknown twists and turns, and over a duration impossible to predict—once again entered into a period of world crisis comparable to that of 1914 through World War II. “To the members of Local 544's union defense guard,” reads his dedication to the third volume of the series, *Teamster Politics*.

Dobbs often pointed to the special contribution to the labor movement made by veterans of the armed forces. An example among the militants we meet in *Teamster Rebellion* is Ray Rainbolt, one of several field organizers of the

cruising pickets during the 1934 strikes, later elected by members of Local 544's 600-strong union defense guard to serve as their commander. For workers in the mid-1930s to choose a Sioux Indian to lead them in combat—to issue them orders, to discipline them if necessary—was far, far from an everyday occurrence in this country, especially in the Upper Midwest or Western United States. The standing Rainbolt achieved among the ranks of fighting workers is a demonstration of the depth of the changes in political attitudes, battle discipline, and human solidarity forged in the course of the class combat described in Dobbs's Teamster books.



In an August 1966 talk, presented to an audience substantially composed of members of the Young Socialist Alliance at a West Coast Vacation School held in California, Farrell Dobbs summed up the world historical view that best describes his lifetime political course; the class characteristics indispensable for any proletarian revolutionist; and what the working class demands of its leaders, above all.

We must be constantly aware of the key role of the United States in the world. United States imperialism is today the powerhouse of world reaction, as the war in Vietnam is abundantly demonstrating.

It is an iron fact that until capitalism is overturned here in the United States of America, the gang of imperialist mad dogs that rule this country are going to remain a mortal threat to all humanity. We must never forget that.

That means the showdown battle for world socialism is going to be fought right here in the United States of

America. And when the revolutionary victory is won, outlived, decadent capitalism is going to disappear literally overnight from the face of our planet. Humanity is going to march forward to the building of an enlightened socialist society where people for the first time can really live together on this planet in peace and in security and with freedom. Humanity will finally realize the type of rewarding life that human intelligence is so abundantly capable of making, even at the present level of technological development. Once humanity learns how to conduct itself politically, organizationally, and socially, it can take advantage of these wonders.

That's what we dedicate our lives to. We of the party, we revolutionaries in the United States—acting as best we can in solidarity with revolutionary fighters across the world—must always keep in mind that in the last analysis the fate of humanity rests on the socialist revolution in the United States. Our task is to build a party capable of leading that revolution, going up against the most heinous of the reactionary, monstrous ruling class regimes that exist on the face of this planet: the imperialist ruling class of the United States.

The road ahead in that struggle is going to be strewn with obstacles, and there are going to be many pitfalls. There's no roadmap, no way you can find some kind of a detailed handbook that's going to tell you what to do at each juncture. Our task is to chart a revolutionary course, based on a fundamental understanding of our program—a basic feel of our revolutionary strategy—and to hammer out the tactics in that direction as we go along.

There's no timetable. Nobody can say how long it's going to take or when it's going to happen. I personally feel that those of you sitting in this room today,

who have got all your youth going for you, have got at least Damon Runyon's six-to-five chance of seeing that explosion.

But in saying so I want to add immediately: *don't make that a condition. Don't adopt the criterion that the revolutionary change must happen in your time.* Don't take as a guide to your active life that narrow, provincial, self-centered notion that if it doesn't happen during the time of your own subjective existence on this planet, it's not important.

Always remember that history is magnificently indifferent to the problems of the individual. History doesn't care whether you die at six or live to be seven hundred, if that were possible, or what happens during your particular lifetime. As the German poet Goethe once said, "History marches like a drunken beggar on horseback."

A lot can happen during your limited lifespan, or you can live a dull existence. Some people have had the good fortune to live more in a year than others at a different historical juncture could live in their whole lifetime. Or, as Plekhanov once put it, "If it hadn't been for the French Revolution, Napoleon would probably have ended up as a corporal in the French artillery."

Don't make it a condition that the socialist revolution must come in your lifetime. Be not only a citizen of the planet; be a citizen of time. Recognize that what's fundamental is to be in rapport with the human race from the dawn of history, on to heights we can only vaguely begin to dream of.

And what's the alternative? The alternative is to make a compromise with this rotten capitalist system. Do you know what people who do that are like? You remember the movie, *The Devil and Daniel Webster*? Jabez Stone,

you know, sold his soul to Scratch, the devil. He did so on the promise that his personal ambitions would thus be served. Later he regretted the action and asked to have his soul returned. Scratch, who was played by Walter Huston, that magnificent actor, finally said all right, he'd give it back.

So Scratch took a small matchbox from his pocket. He opened the box and began poking around in it with his stubby finger trying, and trying, to find the mean little soul of Jabez Stone so he could give it back.

That's symbolic of what you do to your own soul if you make a compromise with this rotten system.

Our job is to build a movement of men and women who emulate the seasoned fighters of the Continental line in the first American Revolution. Learn to be professional revolutionary fighters. Don't be summer soldiers. Don't dabble; don't vacillate. Put nothing above the considerations of the movement. Maintain your place in the front ranks of the revolutionary fighters, and stand in that place for the duration.

There is no other way in which you can find so rich, so rewarding, so fruitful, and so purposeful a life.



Farrell Dobbs would have toasted the translation into Spanish and publication of *Rebelión Teamster* with great pleasure. Above all he would have relished the story of young, fighting miners in Utah listening to a sight translation page by page during a long night in their picket shack. That would have struck a familiar chord.

He often pointed out how difficult it was in the 1930s, when he started searching for political answers, to find even one book that gave him the kind of historical per-

spective he was thirsting for, how he scoured the public libraries looking for something, anything. And he described the lightning-bolt impact on him of the first Marxist books and pamphlets he was given to read by cadres of the Communist League of America who recruited him, revolutionists like Vincent Ray Dunne, known as V.R., and Carl Skoglund, affectionately called Skogie by all his friends and comrades.

At that time, many fewer of the classics of Marxism had been translated into English, and those that had been published were hard to come by. This was true not only of the works of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, V.I. Lenin, and Leon Trotsky, but also those of leaders of the communist movement in the United States. During the frequent, long hours of driving that were part of the over-the-road campaign, Dobbs was often accompanied by Skogie, who had become a trustee of Local 544 and later its president, an “illegal” immigrant from Sweden under deportation orders on the day he died in 1960! One of the most widely respected leaders of both the union and the Communist League of America, Skogie was fluent not only in English and Swedish but also in German—the first language of Marx and Engels, the language of outstanding revolutionists such as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, and the political language of Lenin, Trotsky, and other leaders of the early Communist International. Over decades Skogie had accumulated a sizeable Marxist library, one that he put to use. As they drove the roads on union organizing assignments, Skogie would often read to Farrell—sometimes from English translations, sometimes sight translating from the German as they went along—giving Farrell access to works of Marxism he so eagerly sought.

A worthy celebration of this first-ever publication of *Rebelión Teamster* would be the completion of this effort—

the translation of the other three volumes that make up the Teamster series, plus a good start on *Revolutionary Continuity: Marxist Leadership in the U.S.*—by 2009, the ninetieth anniversary of the founding in this country of Farrell’s movement, the communist movement.



Teamster Rebellion is not a “manual” or a handbook. It is the record of a concrete experience in the class struggle—one that can be studied and absorbed by class-conscious workers and farmers who find themselves in the midst of other struggles, at other times, in other conditions, speaking many different languages.

In a new century, increasingly marked by looming economic catastrophe, and an accelerating drive toward bloody wars unleashed by the final imperialist power attempting to extend its life, the concrete experiences of the men and women of Local 574 will prove ever more current and valuable. In a world where vanguard workers and farmers, and youth attracted to their struggles, are daily seeking solidarity from and extending it to fellow combatants, *Teamster Rebellion* will be read in a growing number of picket shacks in mountains and prairies, in the middle of large cities and small towns, and translated into other languages, too, across the Americas and beyond.

Teamster Rebellion is dedicated “To the men and women who gave me unshakable confidence in the working class, the rank and file of General Drivers Local 574.” It is their story, the record of what they were able to achieve when they could count on the leadership they deserved.

Today, those seeking to emulate the commitment and seriousness of the Teamster vanguard of 1934 will read it in anticipation of both present and future battles. Through

it they will come to understand the truth that lies at the heart of the *Communist Manifesto*—communism is not a set of ideas, but the constantly renewed generalization of the line of march of a class fighting for its emancipation. And they will join that line of march, becoming a more and more conscious, and more and more battle-savvy part of its vanguard.

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