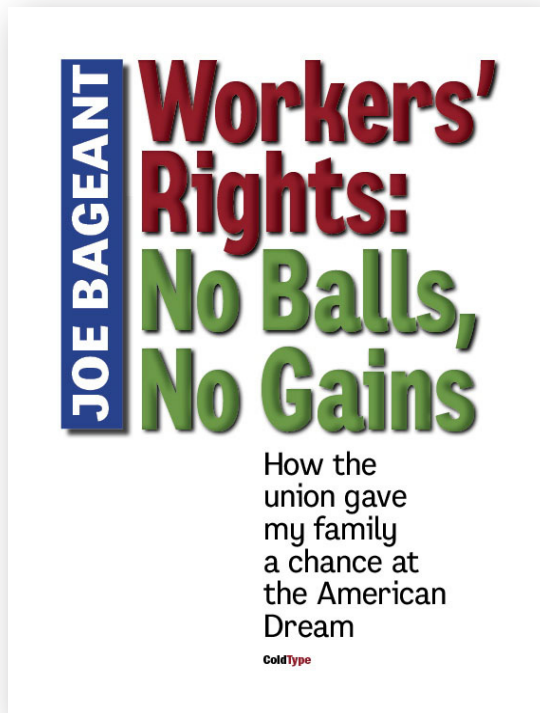


JOE BAGEANT

Workers' Rights: No Balls, No Gains

How the
union gave
my family
a chance at
the American
Dream

ColdType



THE AUTHOR

Joe Bageant is the author of the best selling *Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's class war* (Random House, 2007) and a frequent contributor to the BBC and other international media. A selection of his writings and commentary from working class Americans may be found at JoeBageant.com

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Workers' Rights: No balls, no gains

How the union gave my family a chance at the American Dream

In looking back on growing up, I always remember 1957 and 1958 as “the two good years.” They were the only years my working-class redneck family ever caught a real break in their working lives, and that break came because of organized labor.

After working as a farmhand, driving a hicktown taxi part time and a dozen catch-as-catch-can jobs, my father found himself owning a used semi-truck and hauling produce for a Teamster-unionized trucking company called Blue Goose.

Daddy was making more money than he'd ever made in his life, about \$4,000 a year. The median national household income at the time was \$5,000, mostly thanks to America's unions. After years of moving from one rented dump to another, we bought a modest home (\$8,000) and felt like we might at last be getting some traction in achieving the so-called American Dream.

Yup, Daddy was doing pretty good for a backwoods boy who'd quit school

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in the sixth or seventh grade – he was never sure, which gives some idea how seriously the farm boy took his attendance at the one-room school we both attended in our lifetimes.

This was the golden age of both trucking and of unions. Thirty-five percent of American labor, 17 million working folks, were union members, and it was during this period the American middle class was created.

The American middle class has never been as big as advertised, but if it means the middle third income-wise, then we actually had one at the time. But whatever it means, one-third of working folks, the people who busted their asses day in and day out making the nation function, were living better than they ever had. Or at least had the opportunity to do so.

From the Depression through World War II, the Teamsters Union became a powerful entity, and a popular one, too, because of such things as its pledge never to strike during the war or a national

emergency. President Roosevelt even had a special-designated liaison to the Teamsters.

But power and money eventually drew the usual assortment of lizards, and by the mid-'50s the Teamsters Union had become one corrupt pile of shit at the top level. So rotten even the mob enjoyed a piece of the action.

The membership, ordinary guys like my dad, was outraged and ashamed, but rendered powerless by the crooked union bosses in the big cities.

My old man was no great follower of the news or current events, but he tried to keep up with and understand Teamster developments. Which was impossible since his reading consisted of anti-union Southern newspapers, and the television coverage of Teamster criminality, including murders and the ongoing courtroom trials.

All this left him conflicted. His Appalachian Christian upbringing defined the world in black-and-white, with no gray areas. Inside, he felt he should not be even remotely connected with such vile things as the Teamsters were associated with. And he sometimes prayed for guidance in the matter.

On the other hand, there was the pride and satisfaction in providing for his family in ways previously impossible. He'd built a reasonable, working-class security for those times and that place in West Virginia. Being a Teamster certainly made that possible. But for damned sure no one had handed it to him. He drove his guts out to get what he had.

There were rules and log books and all the other crap that were supposed to assure drivers got enough rest, and ensure road safety and fairness for the truckers. Rural heartland drivers saw it for the bullshit it was, but it was much better-



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paying bullshit. For a little guy hauling produce from Podunk, USA, to the big cities, it still came down to heartburn, hemorrhoids and longer hauls and longer hours than most driver’s falsified log books showed. And sometimes way too much Benzedrine, or “bennies.”

Bennies were a type of speed commonly used by truckers back then because of the grueling hauls. As a former doper who has done bennies, I can avow they are some gritty, nerve-jagging shit. Their only virtue is making you wide awake and jumpy, and after you’ve been awake on them a couple of days, which many drivers were, crazier than a shit-house rat.

Nearly every truck stop sold bennies under the counter. Once, while hallucinating on bennies, Daddy nearly wiped out a roadside joint. He recalled “layin’ on the jake brake, down shifting and watching hundreds of the witches like in The Wizard of Oz come down out of the sky in the dark.” Somehow he got 30,000 pounds back onto the road while several folks inside the diner were pissing themselves in the window-side booths.

My daddy ran the eastern seaboard in a 12-wheeler – there were no 18-wheelers yet. It had polished chrome and bold letters that read “BLUE GOOSE LINE.” Parked alongside our little asbestos-sided house, I’d marvel at the magic of those bold words, the golden diamond and sturdy goose. And dream of someday “burning up Route 50” like my dad.

Old U.S. Route 50 ran near the house and was the stuff of legend if your daddy happened to be a truck driver who sometimes took you with him on the shorter hauls: “OK boy, now scrunch down and look into the side mirror. I’m gonna turn the top of them side stacks red hot.” And he would pop the clutch and strike sparks

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on the anvil of the night, downshifting toward Pinkerton, Coolville and Hanging Rock. It never once occurred to me that his ebullience and our camaraderie might be due to a handful of bennies.

Yessir, Old 50 was a mighty thing, a howling black slash through the Blue Ridge Mountain fog. A place where famed and treacherous curves made widows, and truck stops and cafes bloomed in the tractor trailers' smoky wakes. A road map will tell you it eventually reaches Columbus and St. Louis, places I imagined had floodlights raking the skies heralding the arrival of heroic Teamster truckers like my father. Guys who'd fought in Germany and Italy and the Solomon Islands and were still wearing their service caps these years later, but now pinned with the gold steering wheel of the Teamsters Union. Such are a working-class boy's dreams.

I have two parched photos from that time. One is of me and my brother and sister, ages 10, 8 and 6. We are standing in the front yard, three little redneck kids with bad haircuts squinting for some faint clue as to whether there was really a world out there, somewhere beyond West Virginia.

The other photo is of my mother and the three of us on the porch of that house on Route 50. On the day my father was slated to return from any given run, we'd all stand on the porch listening for the sound of air brakes, the deep roar as he came down off the mountain. Each time, my mother would step onto the porch blotting her lipstick, Betty Grable-style hair rustling in the breeze, and say, "Stand close, your daddy's home."

And that was about as good as it ever got for our family. Daddy's heart later gave way to a congenital defect, and he lost everything. He was so scrupulously honest about debts, he could never recover



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financially. Unable to borrow money, uneducated and weakened for life, he set to working in car washes and garages.

After his union trucking days were over, we were assigned to the margins of America, a million miles from the American Dream, joining those people never seen on television, represented by no politician and never heard from in halls of power.

Now it was only a little house by the side of the road with not enough closets and ugly asbestos shingle siding. But it was ours, just like the truck and the chance to get ahead that it offered. And we had felt like we were some small part of America as it was advertised. All because of a union job during the heyday of unions in this nation.

It was also a period of Teamsters Union corruption, replete with criminal moguls such as Dave Beck, George Meany and Jimmy Hoffa. Yet the history of the few top lizards on the national rock of greed is not the history of the people.

If a few pricks and gangsters have occasionally seized power over the dignity of labor, countless more calculating, bloodless and malevolent pricks – the capitalist elites – have always held most of the cards, which is why in 1886, railroad and financial baron Jay Gould could sneer, "I can always hire one-half of the working class to kill the other half." And why a speaker at the U.S. Business Conference Board in 1974 could arrogantly declare, "One man, one vote has undermined the power of business in all capitalist countries since World War II." And why that same year, Business Week magazine said, "It will be a hard pill for many Americans to swallow – the idea of doing with less so that big business can have more. Nothing in modern economic history compares with the selling job that must

now be done to make people accept this new reality.”

The new reality is here, and has been since 1973, the last year American workers made a wage gain in real dollars. Hell, it’s been here so long, we accept it as part of America’s cultural furniture. Only about 12 percent of American workers are unionized, and even with a supposedly union friendly Democratic Congress, unions are still fighting to exist (although government employees are unionized at 36 percent, because the Empire allows some leeway for its commissars).

In fact, things are worse than ever. Employers can now force employees to attend anti-union presentations during the workday, at captive-audience meetings in which union supporters are forbidden to speak under threat of insubordination. Back in 1978, when I was working to organize the local newspaper, the management was not even allowed to speak to the workers on the matter until after the union vote results were in.

Then there’s President Barack Obama, the guy soft-headed liberals think is going to turn this dreadful scenario around. He talks a good game about unions, when he is forced to. But Obama is working on the things that will “create a legacy,” such as health care (which is simply a new way to pay the insurance industry’s blackmail) or the economy (by appointing the same damned people who fucked it up to fix it), and immigration reform, a nicely nebulous term that can mean whatever either side of the issue wants it to mean.

Obama’s not going to publicly ignore the unions. But he’s not going to sink much political capital into this corporatized nation’s most radioactive issue either. For him, union legislation is just a distraction from the “legacy building” of a very charming, savvy and ambi-



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tious politician. That is the assessment of Glenn Spencer of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, one of the most anti-union institutions in America. (Many thanks to Washington writer Ken Silverstein for publishing Spencer’s astute observations.)

Things are changing though. Union membership climbed 12 percent last year. Twelve percent of 12 percent ain’t shit, but at least it’s forward motion. At that rate, it will only take us 21 years to get back to the 1956 level of union membership.

We can expect no miracles, top union leaders are still among the Empire’s elites. And they are still technically accountable to whatever membership will still have jobs when the 2012 elections roll around. The least they could do is make it harder for Obama to lick off those millions of hard-earned union-support dollars from the top of the campaign contribution ice cream cone as he did in ‘08.

But who can be sure? Because the new union elites and their minions are lawyers and marketing professionals. They’ve never come down off the mountain with both stacks red hot, or gathered on the porch of a crappy but new roadside bungalow, proud because they owned it, and stood up straight because, “Boys, your daddy is coming home.”

I’m not going into the current brouhaha about the Employee Free Choice Act or the “card check” bullshit here. Because what it’s gonna take to restore dignity to laboring America ain’t gonna be more legislative wrangling. What it takes won’t be pretty, maybe not even legal in this new police state, and sure as hell won’t be “within the system.” Because the system is the problem.

So it will be up to us, just like it always has been ... the writer, the Nicaraguan janitor, the 40-year-old family man

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forced to bag groceries at Wal-Mart, the pizza delivery guy, the welder and the certified nurse ... the long-haul trucker and the short-order cook. And they will snicker at us from their gilded roosts on Wall Street and Pennsylvania Avenue.

Some people are bound to get hurt in

the necessary fight. In fact, people need to be willing to get hurt in the fight. That's the way we once gained worker rights, and that's the way we will get them back. The only way to get rid of the robbers' roost is to burn the fucker down.

Anyone got a match?

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