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Beyond 'Wages, Benefits and Working Conditions'

In post-war St. Louis, two visionary Teamsters put their union in service of the community

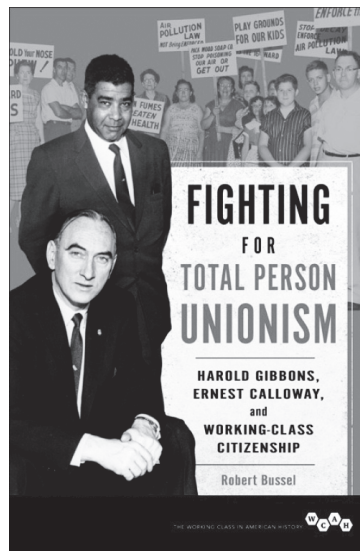
Bob Bussel — the director of University of Oregon's Labor Education and Research Center (LERC) — is the author of a just-released book, *Fighting for Total Person Unionism: Harold Gibbons, Ernest Calloway and Working Class Citizenship*. Published by University of Illinois Press, the book is about two leaders of Teamsters Local 688, a St. Louis warehouse union which had 10,000 members and a social agenda. The *Northwest Labor Press* spoke with Bussel by phone about the book.

Who were Harold Gibbons and Ernest Calloway? Gibbons was a top aide to Jimmy Hoffa and a prominent labor liberal. Calloway was head of the St. Louis NAACP. Together they fashioned a visionary form of social unionism that they called 'total person unionism.'

What's total person unionism? It was their conviction that workers were not only economic beings but social beings. They were interested in using the knowledge and power that workers had — to act as effective

citizens in the community. Because you could only improve working class life so far if you have the greatest conditions where you work but live in a community where public institutions and infrastructure are not in good shape.

What kinds of things did Teamsters get involved in? They took the idea of shop stewards and said, "Let's do this in the community." So they took different wards of the city, and recruited people to be "community stewards." They would solicit grievances from members that lived in those wards, and then would have meetings to discuss what they wanted to work on. They worked on improving public transportation, rat control, public health. They were involved in fights for better public housing, better public education. They did a lot of work on juvenile delinquency prevention, along with things like broken sidewalks and traffic lights. They were really trying to fashion a way in which worker-citizens could improve the quality of life in their neighborhoods — and negotiate at what they called the community bargaining table with the power brokers of St. Louis. They would some-



times launch city-wide campaigns, and they really did establish a strong sense of worker participation as citizens. Workers would go out and investigate these grievances, publicize them. They would go to court. They would mobilize politically.

What were their biggest successes? Well in the 1960s, they had the trade-union-oriented war on the slums, to assist groups in St. Louis that were fighting for better housing and against racial discrimination. They also built senior citizen housing. They even briefly managed St. Louis public housing in the late 1960s, working with striking public housing tenants.

They were very ambitious in saying unions and union members should play a larger social role. It was about showing what the working class could do. They wanted workers to say "We're as good as anybody else." They even established what they called the Health and Medical Camp, 30 miles out of St. Louis, where workers could leave the city and have almost a country club experience. It had a lake, a golf course, family recreation. The sense was, "If our bosses can enjoy these things, we should be able to enjoy them too."

Are there any lessons for today's labor movement from their experiment? Well you always have to be careful about transplanting history from one soil to another because the context changes. But I think this notion of unionism that's concerned about the total person has real potential.

Book talk and signing

- **Eugene:** Tuesday, Nov. 3, 4:30 p.m., Wayne Morse Commons, Knight Law Center.
- **Portland:** Thursday, Nov. 5, 5:30 p.m., Room 302, UO White Stag Building, 70 NW Couch St.

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