

PEOPLE

For a lifelong labor educator, the end of the ninth inning arrives

By Don McIntosh

Bob Bussel did security for Cesar Chavez. He had lunch with the real Norma Rae. And he spent 27 years as a labor educator, training generations of labor leaders. On December 15, age 70, he'll retire after 20 years directing the Labor Education and Research Center (LERC) at University of Oregon.

LERC trains union leaders on how to negotiate contracts and defend members, and produces research reports that help advocates pass pro-worker legislation. But year after year, Bussel has had to deploy every bit of political skill he could muster to keep it funded.

At his Nov. 18 retirement party, Oregon State Rep. Paul Holvey roasted Bussel for those never-ending appeals to help protect LERC's budget, but also thanked him for decades of service to working people.

Bussel first encountered the labor movement in 1973 while living in a New Jersey farmhouse collective. There he was schooled about unionism by his roommate, a heavy highway laborer who'd taken part in wildcat strikes. Bussel had grown up in Memphis and New Jersey and had a degree in history from Cornell University. Now he



started attending grocery store pickets in support of the United Farm Workers, and took a job working on the union's boycott campaign for room and board and \$5 a week. He also went to work in a factory making beverage cartons, where he joined the United Auto Workers.

In 1976, he went to work for Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU)

as the New Jersey coordinator of its boycott campaign against JP Stevens. JP Stevens was an early adopter of the antiunion playbook that later came to define corporate America. It shifted production from the Northeast to the nonunion South, and when ACTWU followed and tried to organize, the company broke federal labor law every which way. At a mill in Roanoke

Rapids, North Carolina, the union won anyway, and the story of that campaign became the basis for *Norma Rae*, a 1979 film starring Sally Field that received four Oscar nominations. Bussel was one of about 30 staff employed full-time by the union to promote the boycott of JP Stevens' sheets and towels, which were marketed under numerous brand names, and he

met and lunched with Crystal Lee Sutton, whose story the film was based on.

While working for the union, he took night classes at Rutgers University and earned a master's degree in education with a labor emphasis.

In 1983, he helped found the American Labor Museum outside Paterson, New Jersey, at a house that had played a role in the Industrial Workers of the World's (IWW) famous 1913 Paterson silk strike. That year he also met artist Jewel Nelson. They've been married since 1986 and have two grown daughters.

He also spent three or four years as an organizer for ACTWU, and helped workers win a union at several textile firms and a Johnson & Johnson plant in New Mexico. But the Reagan era of plant closures and union-busting had begun, and it was tough going.

In 1986, burned out, he left ACTWU and returned to Cornell to pursue a Ph.D. in history while teaching at its industrial labor relations school. For his Ph.D. thesis, he wrote biographies of three independent radical intellectuals: United Mine Workers organizer

Turn to Page 7

At the Teamsters, the Hoffa era ends

From Page 1

"There's been a major disconnect between the International Union and the local unions and the membership," said Mark Davison, the president of 7,300-member Teamsters Local 162 in Portland. Starting March 2022, Davison will serve a five-year term on the General Executive Board as vice president for the Western Region.

It takes considerable effort to win the leadership of America's sixth largest union. Teamsters United began campaigning two years ago and built a grassroots network of local leaders and rank-and-file activists. Since Davison says since he joined the campaign 18 months ago, he travelled thousands of miles and talked with Teamsters in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, California and Nevada. The slate's first hurdle was the June 2021 convention, where Teamsters United was able to pass several changes to the Teamsters Constitution. One says union contract

bargaining committees must include rank-and-file members who work under the terms of the contract. Another says that no contract can take effect without a majority vote of bargaining unit members—the previous rule was that a contract recommended by the leadership could take effect if less than half the members vote on it, and less two-thirds of members vote to reject it. That's what happened with the 2018 UPS contract.

Talking with the *Labor Press*, Davison was critical of the previous administration, saying Hoffa Jr. called few meetings, ceded a lot of decision making to consultants, and failed to robustly enforce the terms of national contracts. But Davison also made it clear the new leadership intends to put internal divisions behind them: "Regardless of who members supported in the election, we must all unite as Teamsters because our fight is with the employers."

The new leadership takes office

March 2022, and its first challenge will be bargaining a new contract at the package delivery company DHL to replace the one that expires in April. That will be a prelude to the main event—UPS. UPS employs over 300,000 Teamsters, and its current contract expires July 31, 2023. O'Brien and Zuckerman say their top priority will be to eliminate a two-tier arrangement in which some members at UPS work weekends and get lower pay. They also say they agree with the pledge Hoffa made this June to unionize Amazon, but they also say the Teamsters will first need to show Amazon workers that the union can win big improvements, and that means getting a fair contract at UPS.

Hoffa Jr.'s departure marks the end of an era. He has led the Teamsters since 1998, is he's son of Jimmy Hoffa, who led the Teamsters from 1957 to 1971 and famously disappeared on July 30, 1975 after meeting with Mafiosi.



MEET THE NEW WESTERN REGION VICE PRESIDENT Mark Davison, 52, grew up in Southern California in a union family. In 1994, looking for a job that would provide benefits for his young family, he got a job loading trucks in Portland for UPS. Within six months he became a union steward, and went to work full-time for the union in 2000. He was elected president of Local 162 in 2009 and re-elected ever since.