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## Hoffa

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HOFFA. By *Arthur A. Sloane*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 1991. Pp. x, 430. \$24.95.

The food at Machus Red Fox may not be famous, but the parking lot is. There, on July 30, 1975, Jimmy Hoffa kept his last appointment with some mafia thugs, thus bringing a quick end to his campaign to regain the presidency of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Hoffa was a key figure in building the modern American labor movement, but he also bears much of the blame for solidifying the ties between one of America's largest unions and organized crime.

Arthur Sloane's recent biography, entitled simply *Hoffa*, explores the rise and fall of this intriguing character. Professor Sloane follows a chronological sequence of events. Hoffa came from humble surroundings in rural Indiana, and he later lived in Detroit (pp. 3-7). His introduction to labor organizing came when he led a successful strike at a Kroger warehouse at the age of eighteen (pp. 7-9). The warehouse bargaining unit affiliated with the Teamsters, and Hoffa soon found himself as a full-time organizer for the union (pp. 13-14).

Professor Sloane carefully follows Hoffa's rise in the Teamster ranks. An important moment in Hoffa's education as a labor leader occurred in 1937 when he assisted Farrell Dobbs and other communists leading the Minneapolis Teamster Local 574 (pp. 18-22). Dobbs had perfected the secondary boycott and hot cargo tactics which became the hallmark of Teamster labor relations.<sup>1</sup> He also was instrumental in expanding the scope of Teamster contracts from localities to multistate regions. Dobbs and his colleagues, however, fell victim to a Teamster purge led by none other than his former pupil, Jimmy Hoffa (pp. 29-31). Dobbs sided with the new Congress of International Organizations (CIO), which was trying to win over Teamster members to its ranks. The Teamster union, remaining with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), sent Hoffa to preserve its gains in the upper Midwest. After months of street fighting in 1941, Hoffa and the AFL won. His reputation for ruthlessness in the face of challenges was now firmly in place.

Hoffa returned to Detroit only to find the CIO waging a more successful recruiting effort there. This conflict, Professor Sloane writes, prompted Hoffa to turn to organized crime for the first time in his career (pp. 32-34). With the aid of the mob's pool of toughs, Hoffa

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1. Secondary boycotts occurred when a union fought a target employer by striking or picketing other employers who did business with the target. Hot cargo agreements contractually compelled the employer not to carry goods made by employers with whom the Teamsters had a labor problem. See DOUGLAS L. LESLIE, *LABOR LAW IN A NUTSHELL* 119-80 (3d ed. 1992). Both practices are now illegal. National Labor Relations Act, §§ 8(b)(4) and 8(e), *codified in* 29 U.S.C. §§ 158(b)(4) and 158(e) (1988).

threw the CIO out of the trucker organizing business in Michigan. Established now as the key Teamster in the Midwest, Hoffa continued to expand his power and mob ties.

Hoffa's penchant for associating with criminals and using strong-arm tactics with adversaries quickly brought him to the attention of the federal government. Attorneys will find Professor Sloane's account of Hoffa's repeated struggles with the law fascinating. His troubles began with the investigations by the Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor or Management Field, known as the McClellan Committee, in 1957. Though Hoffa was acquitted on the charge of bribing a Committee attorney, Senator John McClellan and Chief Counsel Robert Kennedy were able to tie Hoffa to known mobsters within and outside the union (pp. 77-103). They also produced evidence of at least facially improper uses of union money and power. Hoffa nonetheless won the Teamster presidency that year, prompting the expulsion of the union from the AFL-CIO.<sup>2</sup>

Hoffa's legal troubles continued throughout his presidency. He was acquitted of illegally wiretapping his own employees in 1958, but that year generated further embarrassing hearings before the McClellan Committee (pp. 104-05, 114-26). Moreover, Hoffa had to contend with a court-appointed board of monitors for the union. The monitors were part of the settlement of a suit brought by dissident rank and file members to keep Hoffa from becoming president (pp. 105-13). The monitors' task was to help clean out criminals from the Teamsters. Hoffa successfully resisted the monitors' reform efforts (p. 173), but he was less fortunate in escaping jury tampering<sup>3</sup> and pension misuse charges that resulted in convictions (pp. 292-328). He spent five difficult years in Lewisburg Prison until pardoned by President Nixon (pp. 331-38, 350).

Hoffa, though, was more than a crook. He was a remarkable labor leader. Professor Sloane is a labor relations professor, and his discussions of intraunion and union-employer relationships are the most insightful in the book. For example, the author spends significant time analyzing the "open-end" dispute resolution mechanism the Teamsters established with employer representatives (pp. 221-37). The final stage of the open-end grievance system was not neutral, binding arbitration but rather a hearing before a board of union and employer representatives. Jimmy Hoffa often chaired these hearings. The open-end system therefore effectively allowed Hoffa to interpret the collective bargaining agreement as he went along. Professor Sloane takes

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2. The AFL-CIO has only recently readmitted the Teamsters. See James Warren, *AFL-CIO Welcomes Teamsters*, CHI. TRIB., Oct. 30, 1987, § 1, at 5.

3. The jury tampering case arose after a hung jury failed to convict Hoffa of conspiracy. According to the conspiracy complaint, Hoffa negotiated a labor dispute settlement favorable to Commercial Carriers, Inc. Commercial Carriers in return signed sweetheart contracts with Test Fleet Corp., a trucking company owned by Hoffa and a close associate. Pp. 45, 84-85, 259-66.

great pains to show that the open-end system was fair, even though Hoffa clearly dominated these meetings with his strong personality and willingness to threaten recalcitrant employers with strikes. Regardless of its fairness, the open-end system served as another example of Hoffa's imperial management of the entire trucking industry.

*Hoffa* may be most useful to the labor leaders of tomorrow, if they have much of a tomorrow.<sup>4</sup> Hoffa had many attributes an effective trade unionist should have. He had a close relationship with the rank and file (pp. 53-54), terrific organizing ability (pp. 13-15), and solid negotiation skills that led to the fulfillment of his dream of a national contract for truckers (pp. 288-92). Hoffa also had an impeccable family life (pp. 54-65). Nevertheless, his connections to the mob cost the Teamsters money, public credibility, and ultimately his own leadership. Hoffa's belief that he was above the law, demonstrated by his public contempt for the legal proceedings brought against him, added to his undoing and the isolation of his union. Regrettably, Hoffa's criminality, and not his success in building the Teamsters, remains his chief legacy to the labor movement. Today's labor leaders — Ron Carey of the Teamsters,<sup>5</sup> Stephen Yokich of the United Auto Workers,<sup>6</sup> and Dennis Rivera of the Drug, Hospital and Health Care Employees Union<sup>7</sup> to name a few — should learn from Hoffa's example. To revive the labor movement, unions must avoid or clean out the undesirables at all costs.<sup>8</sup> They must also devote every available resource to organizing new workers.

*Hoffa* has two weaknesses. First, Professor Sloane is essentially a Hoffa apologist. In describing Hoffa's initial ties to organized crime, for example, he writes: "[I]t should not be forgotten that in originally establishing these relationships, he was merely recognizing a portion of the world in which he and his adversaries lived and walking a road that some of the latter had already taken. He was nothing if not a realist" (p. 34). Hoffa's leadership skills and accomplishments, Professor Sloane further argues, should also mitigate his crimes (pp. 404-05). Fortunately for the book's credibility, however, Professor Sloane's re-

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4. For an excellent discussion of the decline of organized labor, and possible legal reforms which could revitalize it, see PAUL C. WEILER, *GOVERNING THE WORKPLACE* 7-15, 105-24, 241-73 (1990). See also THOMAS GEOGHEGAN, *WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?* (1991), which provides a more personal account and analysis of hard times for American labor.

5. For a discussion of how Carey is following Hoffa's footsteps in vigorous resistance to federal monitors, see Richard Behar, *How Hoffa Haunts the Teamsters*, *TIME*, Dec. 21, 1992, at 60.

6. See Laurent Belsie, *Auto Workers Union Facing Growing Pressures*, *CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR*, Nov. 10, 1992, at 8.

7. See Sam Roberts, *A New Face for American Labor*, *N.Y. TIMES*, May 10, 1992, § 6, at 14.

8. Unfortunately, the Teamsters are not the only union which has built a longstanding relationship with the mob. See, e.g., Bill Berkeley, *Press Gang*, *THE NEW REPUBLIC*, Feb. 17, 1992, at 20 (describing mob control of the Newspaper and Mail Deliverers Union of New York and Vicinity).

spect for Hoffa's realism and talents does not go to extremes. The biographer does acknowledge the damage Hoffa's criminality has done to American labor (p. 408), a fact beyond dispute. In the end, Professor Sloane's emphasis of Hoffa's positives may provide a needed, more balanced account of this controversial figure.

Second, others may criticize *Hoffa* for its failure to probe deeply into the man's personality and motivations. Professor Sloane's attempts are sometimes feeble. For example, the book ends with this passage: "He was stronger willed, more hard charging, more powerful, and more notorious than most people. But he was, in his many strengths and his many weaknesses no less human" (p. 409). Still, Professor Sloane can take solace in the fact that some people, including, I think, Jimmy Hoffa, are not all that complicated. Hoffa was at the right place at the right time, the Midwest in the 1930s, for someone with natural and ruthless organizing skills. His success, toughness, greed, and ambition propelled him from there.

For those who enjoy the murder-mystery aspect of Hoffa's life, Professor Sloane provides a thorough discussion of the events and theories of his subject's disappearance (ch. 15). When he died, Hoffa was attempting to regain the top spot of the Teamsters, though he faced a pardon restriction that barred him from participating in union activities until 1980. The purpose of the July 30, 1975 meeting remains unclear. Hoffa was either trying to solicit the mob's help in his comeback or to make up with Anthony Provenzano, a mob lieutenant and former close friend of Hoffa's in the Teamster leadership (pp. 392-95). In any case, an interesting career — from the perspective of both lawyers and labor leaders — ended violently that day. Professor Sloane's *Hoffa*, fortunately, preserves for them "the little guy's" life and times in a solid and readable account.

— James S. Beall