From the Depression to the top of the Union: Perceptions, realities and politics of the Teamsters

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Photos



Courtesy image

Francis W. (Frank) Hackett, at age 19 or 20., circa 1952-53, in the summer at Wellfleet.









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Wakefield —

*This is the first in a four-part series.*

**Growing Up During the Depression**

At 5 years old current Wakefield resident, Francis W. (Frank) Hackett, moved from Pittsfield to Cambridge in 1938 during the Great Depression, where his father, Francis E. Hackett, found work at Boston Woven Hose and Rubber Company. The elder Hackett grew up in Pittsfield, the son of Jesse James Hackett.

Frank, the son, would eventually be the third generation of drivers in his family. His grandfather drove a horse-drawn carriage on a route from Pittsfield to Dalton, a five-mile ride or to Northampton, Mass., a 41-mile route and his started out as a laborer at Boston Woven Hose and later became a loading dock worker, then a driver when he joined M&M.

At the tender and impressionable age of 4 or 5, Frank witnessed some of the worst of workplace inhumanity and poverty – a time where workers had no rights, no benefits, no welfare, no unemployment compensation, and certainly no workers’ compensation or disability insurance. He bore witness to great social and corporate injustice.

He witnessed injured factory workers not only thrown to the streets, without compensation and loss of wages, but without consideration for medical care. Men lined up at the factory gates pleading for work. The foreman held up a sign with numbers on it. The numbers did not represent how many workers they needed as most people think – 7 crossed off, 6 crossed off, 5, 4 — it was the number of cents they were paying that day per hour. Because so many men needed work, they were willing to take whatever few pennies the company offered. Cambridge was full of unemployed, homeless people, some families even living in the streets in cardboard boxes, barrels lit with fires to keep them warm. It looked like a lawless, impoverished society.

An innocent young boy and his father were helpless against companies offering work for slave-wages and poor conditions – and all of the ills of a struggling society. But those experiences were the foundation for a young man who would need work and follow in his father’s footsteps to become a family provider, doing whatever it took to put food on the table. He was someone who wanted to help right the wrongs he fell victim to in his early years.

The Hacketts later moved to Danvers where Frank attended the Fox Hill School for first and second grades while his father commuted to Cambridge. Then they moved to Somerville in 1941 when the war started and gas was rationed. It was too difficult for his father to commute daily. His father quit Boston Woven Hose and joined the Merchant Marines from 1942-45 as an unarmed civilian on-board the liberty ships. It was a dangerous life, and he left his wife alone with three children at that time. As the oldest child, Frank assumed some of the “man of the house” responsibilities from 9 through 11 years old until his father returned. His father joined M&M Transport in Somerville in 1945, upon his return.

**From servicemen to laborer**

Then it was a different time. In some ways, Frank was in the right place at the right time to be able to make a mark in the workplace. He became part of a system of change in America. He returned from a six-month tour of duty with the U.S. Navy in French Morocco on a medical discharge at 18, and he began working in the Charlestown Navy Yard. He stayed there for about 18 months as a civilian laborer making about 98-cents per hour, with no union in place. He left because he was performing janitorial duties and he had no future there. One day he drove his father to work at M&M Transport, and the owner came out and asked him where he was working.

“If you want a real job, come work for me,” he said.

It was customary in those days for sons to work in the same companies as their fathers" and that tradition continued until the 1940s or so.

He left the Navy Yard and joined M& M Transport in the summer of 1953, where his father was well liked by union and company officials. This was Frank’s first experience with a union and a chance to fulfill his dream. He joined Teamsters Local 25. He became a full-time employee working on the loading dock where most truckers started, at the bottom of the seniority list. Frank observed management and union activity from the lowest vantage point in the company.

Within the year, Frank noticed there was a great separation between the union and the employees.

“They were like a vigilante committee – with union men meeting in the bars after work. Strange things were starting to happen. I saw that the employees were highly critical of the unions, management and the jobs they held,” he said.

His father warned him to stay out of the barrooms and away from these men.

“This was not Teamsters Union leadership; these were men that were frowned on by union officials. We saw them take everything into their own hands, with no opportunity for discussion or debate. It was not an inclusive process. The union steward was usually in agreement with these men because of their intimidation.”

The elected union officials would hold meetings in the union hall and the union business agents would visit the company on occasion to settle disputes that may arise. But what really existed was like a union within a union, with men who worked as truck drivers and platform workers arguing positions for other workers in the barroom. Most had worked for the company from 10 to 30 years.

“Not one of them was qualified to represent anyone,” Frank said. “They were not elected officials and they never read our agreements. The few who read it, didn’t know how to interpret it. Instead of following collective bargaining procedures, they resorted to a wildcat strike. The union negotiated agreements with employers on our behalf, and we paid our union dues.”

**The ‘Wildcat’ strike**

A wildcat strike required union employees to walk off the job before any grievance procedure could take place. This strike was called over a small dispute. The company was paying vacation time, dividing the salary by 53 weeks instead of dividing it by 52 weeks, as outlined in the union agreement.

 Frank thought the company was wrong to do that, but he also thought the union employees were wrong to walk out without engaging in due process and honoring the union agreement, calling for arbitration.

“I refused to cross the picket line,” he said. “Now we’re out of work, without pay, and striking. But no one would cross the picket line. At that time, if the union steward said you were on strike, you’d follow them to the picket line.”

Standing on the picket line at the age of 22, Frank saw someone pull a gun on the union steward. He and a few others stopped that action immediately. (At that age, Frank was a strapping young man of 6-foot, 3 1/2 inches.)

**The Union official arrives**

A large, black Oldsmobile pulled up to the picket line. A slight gentleman of about 5-foot, 8 inches, looking like he weighed about 90 pounds, stepped out of the car. He walked directly up to Frank and asked “Why are you on strike?”

Frank spoke the truth, saying, “I really don’t know. Everyone else is out here and I’m with them,” he answered.

He knew this man who to be William (Billy) J. McCarthy, the president of Teamsters Local 25. Frank recognized him from meetings at the union hall.

McCarthy replied, “This is going to stop right now. This is foolishness. I’m ordering everyone back to work and we will follow the agreement.”

Frank admired him for standing up to everyone. He thought that was the end of the wildcat strikes.

He was also hoping this was the end of the barroom mentality of people who had no interest in settling disputes in the union hall and following the grievance procedures, as outlined in the union agreement.

“That was okay in my father’s day,” said Frank. “But it wasn’t good for companies or employees. We would be out of work and the company could potentially go out of business. Both union officials and employers lost control of their people. It was a lose-lose situation for the Teamsters Union and the company owners. The wildcat strike didn’t benefit anyone.”

At that time, Frank was paid about $1.50 an hour, only 10 cents more per hour on Saturdays; and he worked for one year to earn a one-week vacation. Take-home pay was about 70 percent of that after state and federal taxes. No health care insurance or pension was offered.

But Frank’s problems weren’t over. There were other challenges in store for him. In fact, a new problem was about to begin. Frank and several other employees were threatened with a potential $1 million lawsuit for their activities on the picket line.

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