A Teamster in the making: Myths, Realities and Politics of the Teamster’s Union

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Photos



Courtesy image

Frank and Ann Hackett in Dec. 1960 with Kimberly, 4 and Kyle, 1











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Wakefield —

*Part two of a four-part series. Part one is posted at www.wickedlocalwakefield.com.*

During the “wildcat” strike, a confrontation took place between Frank Hackett and one of the M&M company owners, Wesley Marks, who attempted to drive a truck through the picket line. He was stopped by several men on the line. He leaped out of the cab and a pushing match ensued between Marks and Hackett. Pushing led to punching then some strikers helped break it up.

With the men ordered back to work, the company took a position against Frank’s return and the return of several other employees for alleged violence on the picket line.

“Local 25 was responsible for our actions and therefore, the company threatened to file suit against them for failure to follow grievance procedures outlined in our agreement,” he said.

Frank could see that the problems were mounting and his chances to return to work were very slim.

“During negotiations with union officers, Billy McCarthy, president of Local 25, and the company’s attorney, this lawsuit was finally settled and the company dropped the charges, allowing the men to return to work. However, I was on the bottom of the seniority list,” said Frank, “so I was the easiest one of the group to get rid of. My employment at M&M became a nightmare. I was used as a spare or casual worker, getting laid off at the end of every shift. I moved from one trucking company to another, always looking for work.

“At 23, I married my wife, Ann Cutting from Chelsea and Everett, and took on new family responsibilities. Then came our first daughter and I was still paying the full price for my actions that day on the picket line. I had to change something in order for us to survive, so I decided to educate myself.”

“For several years in the beginning of our marriage, telegrams were coming to the house every other week for Frank not to report to work, then the next day there was a telegram to return to work,” said his wife, Ann. “Sometimes Frank would work for one company then later the same day, report to another company. I’d tell Frank to go through the phone book and look for work, and he’d call different companies. Sometimes, he’d end up working around the clock without any sleep. But he never collected unemployment. He always found work whether it was for one day or one week. He worked in a carwash on Saturdays and did special runs on Sunday nights.”

“I’d take the trucks off the railroad cars and run them to New Hampshire for Federal Beef,” said Frank. “But it only paid $10-20 for the Sunday run. I would sleep for an hour or two in the truck while the dock workers were unloading the beef.”

Frank continued with this chaotic work schedule for about eight years with no permanent position, yet working from Sunday nights to Saturday mornings without seeing his family. However, he always maintained his union membership and his place on the seniority list. This enabled him to continue working within the industry, usually 60-65 hours per week.

 When his second daughter was born, Frank was still moving from company to another. One of his positions was for Vickers Express in Chelsea, unloading 100-pound burlap bags of glue on the pier in South Boston. Then he’d drive the load to Nicholson Glue in Cambridge and unload it there. That equaled 80,000 pounds for one day of work (20 tons each way), with just one other man helping.

**Meeting Jimmy Hoffa**

“I worked on Tom Curtain’s campaign for business agent and in 1958 he called me and said “Come down and meet the boss.’ Of course I thought he was referring to our Local 25 president Billy McCarthy, so I went down to the Union Hall. When I showed up, International Teamsters president Jimmy Hoffa is standing there and I’m introduced. A day or two later, he came to visit M&M with Billy McCarthy and I’m loading trucks and the company owner came out to greet Hoffa. Right in front of him, Hoffa walked inside the truck and shook my hand and said, ‘Hi Frank, how are you doing?’ Marks is standing there looking stunned and asked me: ‘How do you know Jimmy Hoffa?’”

Hoffa served as the International President from 1958 until 1971.

“Later that year my wife and I attended a dinner at the Hynes Auditorium where Hoffa spoke. The vice presidents were on the podium with him, and I turned to my wife and said: ‘Someday I’m going to be up there.’ My wife looked at me like I was crazy.”

Shortly after Hoffa was elected, Hoffa negotiated national agreements and brought about tremendous change. Frank credits him with bringing health insurance, pensions and higher wages to the members; and he worked in conjunction with Billy McCarthy on the local level to implement these changes. Although Frank saw positive changes when Hoffa was elected, the AFL-CIO split from the Teamsters, because they alleged corruption.

**Hackett’s rise begins**

 “I had forged a great relationship with our Local 25 business agent, George Sardello,” said Frank, “who was helping me find work and he gave me a copy of our union agreement. I stayed up many nights reading and studying that until I knew the contents by heart.”

Frank added, “But that wasn’t enough, for I also began to question the intent of the language and ask: Why had both the union and employers come to this agreement? I went to the best people I could find and finally understood that agreements were negotiated to create industrial peace for both sides, and both of their needs. The rank and file of the union benefited from those efforts.

“With this newly-found knowledge, I could not wait to go back to the barroom arguments. People who were ignorant of the union agreement became easy prey for me and I took everyone on in legal arguments. At that time, I was getting my workouts in the parking lots behind the bars, where we straightened out our differences….*read between the lines*. I understood how unions worked and their value to their members. I was in a position to defend the unions. My younger brother, Peter, joined the company in 1960; and he, my father and I had some heated arguments.

“I took on the stewards who criticized elected officers. I argued positions with everyone that organized labor could work for all employees, if only given a chance. Finally, an opportunity developed for me – an opening for a shop steward at M&M and I decided to run for office. I had all the answers for all the problems, and boy, was I in for an awakening!

“Early in 1963 most of the 185 M&M employees were at the union hall on a Saturday to hold the election. My father and a friend called Wimpy Jones, tried to get some votes together while campaigning at the hall for me. We didn’t seem too successful, considering there were two other candidates with many more friends surrounding them. The election was held and I received the most votes. That was my first major lesson in politics.”

Because he won the election, Frank was back at M&M as shop steward with full-time work and seniority, and can no longer be laid off. Shortly after, the company moved to Chelsea and acquired other carriers, opening up new routes and expanding the operation. Then things changed drastically. He motivated members to get involved and implemented committees, and a softball league, which grew to about 300 Teamsters playing on Sundays.

“We formed ball clubs and played against each other and soon after, they made me the Commissioner,” said Frank. “Our union hall had been conducting monthly blood drives for the American Red Cross and I helped motivate M&M employees to give blood.

“My crusade was that I wanted the members to see first-hand how the union worked for them, so I was always pushing them toward the union hall so they’d get to know the business agents, too.

“Another change is that people complained verbally to stewards and stories would get mixed up and charges and stories were later denied. For the first time, grievances were recorded in writing as directed by our business agent, Arthur Harrington. At first, people were resistant to change. Everyone was in an uproar about the changes, putting grievances in writing, and criticizing me and the business agent.”

Frank was asked to include on the grievance form, what section of the agreement was violated. Frank was happy to bring forth any grievance, as long as the violation could be documented.

In 1964, Frank’s father took early retirement due to poor health and they presented him with a watch. On Aug. 16 the same year, Frank was riding in the car with his daughters in Winchester and witnessed a head-on collision of two B&M trains. He was the first on the scene and took heroic actions, injuring his shoulder to break through the door and begin rescuing passengers under their seats. He was cited by B&M president DA Benson for his great courage.

Just five months later, he would again be the first on the scene, along with his brother, at a fire in Somerville. They both risked their lives to save a woman trapped in the two-family to no avail. Frank was blown out of the third story and his brother jumped out the second floor. They were both rushed to Mass. General Hospital. Frank only sustained minor injuries and his brother was unconscious.

During that 10-year period, Frank ran unopposed for re-election. No one ran against him for steward, a sure sign that most union members were pleased with his efforts.

**Family tragedies and triumphs**

However, within one year from 1969-70, Frank endured an inordinate amount of personal stress and tragedy, in addition to the challenges of being a shop steward and working full-time. He wrote a resignation letter for his steward position from his hospital bed and it was not accepted. Frank was hospitalized for several weeks and out of work for six months, after taking an ice skate blade to the face during a pick-up hockey game, resulting in 800 stitches and the need for plastic surgery. The same day, Frank’s youngest daughter was later brought to Floating Hospital for Children with pneumonia. Frank remembers that it was on Nov. 2, because it was also his wife’s birthday. He didn’t know that his daughter, Kristin, who was born with a hole in her heart, was also in the hospital. Frank did not receive the plastic surgery until May the following year.

Everyone knows the greatest tragedy any parent can live through is the death of a child, and Frank lost his third daughter on May 30, 1970, after heart surgery, though he was assured it would go smoothly.

“Kristin died in my arms at two-and-a-half,” said Frank.

“My wife is terrific,” Frank said. “She lived through visiting us both in the different hospitals, while we had two other small children and then our third daughter died. She never complained.”

While Frank was in the hospital, he received no sick pay and his insurance would not pay for the plastic surgery, considering it to be a cosmetic procedure. Every time Kristin was hospitalized it cost $500 up front.

Frank will never forget his supportive wife’s reaction when he told her he wanted to resign from the union.

“I was running around as the steward and it got to be too much. I remember Ann telling me: ‘With all you put yourself through, all that you’ve done, and now you’re going quit. This is what you lived for.’ So I didn’t quit.”

“The union members really came through for us,” he said. “They collected money every week and sent it home to Ann and then they held a raffle for a TV with the proceeds paying for my plastic surgery.”

Now it was evident that the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Union, truly was a brotherhood. In November 1971, good news came again for the Hacketts, Ann gave birth to Sean, their first son and youngest child.

**Impact on morale**

“Employees who were critical of the union process and officers previously, started to witness first-hand that unions could work and that they were being properly represented. I knew then that the way I was treated, getting laid off and recalled on a regular basis, was a violation of our union agreement.”

Job bidding, vacations, controlling layoffs and everyday grievances such as underpayment, were properly monitored by their new shop steward and their Local 25 business agent. Frank was so busy with union duties, the company took him off the road so he could work on the platform, loading and unloading trucks, and conducting union business.

Frank worked in conjunction with the business agents who were available every Monday night at the union hall from 7-9 p.m. During the 10 years that Frank was steward, he attended those meetings each week (unless he was out-of-town) to discuss grievances, sections of the agreement, and intent and purpose of the language in the agreement. He questioned what the negotiators were trying to accomplish. Frank could see that the union was making headway in representing its members. This all had a positive effect on employee morale.

Then an informant tells him that non-official union meetings are going on in the Avon Café in Chelsea. Frank was not pleased and wanted to do something about it. So he went over to the café to hold “court,” as he referred to it, and “we cleaned out the place.”

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