

✓ When City Attorneys Became Teamsters

☰ Category: Local 237 Oral History Project



Harry Bernstein

Twenty-one years after Teamsters Local 237 was founded in 1952, some 450 lawyers employed by the city, members of the Civil Service Bar Association, voted to affiliate with the local.

The CSBA began in 1945 as a professional/social organization for civil service attorneys. The organization had various committees, such as a legislative committee and a government ethics committee, and members wrote papers on and discussed legal issues. When public employees won the right to collective bargaining in 1967, the CSBA successfully petitioned to become the bargaining agent for the city's attorneys.

Although as attorneys, CSBA members were experienced in litigating and negotiating, they soon found that was not enough to get what they wanted from the city. Local 237 retiree Harry Bernstein, now 87 and living in Palm Beach, Florida, was a supervisor in the legal division of the Department of Social Services at the time. "Before we affiliated with the Teamsters, the city Office of Labor Relations didn't want to deal with attorneys who worked for the city," Bernstein recalled. "It happens that my brother-in-law, Herbert Haber, was commissioner of labor relations under Mayor Lindsay, so I asked him why. 'You have no clout,' was his answer."

By the early 1970s, although some members wanted to remain independent, the CSBA decided to seek affiliation with a larger, more powerful union. The leaders invited representatives from District Council 37, the Service Employees International Union, the Communications Workers of America, and Teamsters Local 237. "Many of the attorneys didn't want to have anything to do with the Teamsters because of their reputation," Bernstein recounted. "They said, 'Throw the bum out!'"

"The Teamster organizer said, 'Just give me five minutes.'" His other request was that he be allowed to speak last. "So we let him speak," said Bernstein, "and he said the same thing my brother-in-law said: 'You can't get anywhere because you don't have clout.'" The organizer, Bert Rose, who was then Local 237's director of organization, spoke for two minutes, maybe less. "I said, If you're looking for strength at the bargaining table, your

only choice is the Teamsters," Rose recalled. Rose was persuasive.

The attorneys were also impressed that Barry Feinstein, then president of Local 237, was an attorney himself, and liked the fact that as a Teamster affiliate, they would retain their organizational structure and some independence. The attorneys chose the Teamsters.

"The fellas decided to try the Teamsters for a year," Bernstein said. "A day later I got a call from Herbert Haber. 'I heard what happened,' he said. 'Now you have clout.'"

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