

Questions and Answers About the Right to Vote

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Our union's first-ever one-member, one-vote election for top officers is scheduled for Fall 2010. But a new proposal from some BLET officials would eliminate our Right to Vote before we ever get to use it.

In 2006, BLET members voted by 62 percent for direct membership election of National Division officers.

Now Divisions 13, 98, 155, and 236 are circulating a petition to overturn our new voting system before it has ever been used.

Here are some common questions and answers presented by BLET Members for Democracy about the Right to Vote and the proposal to take it away.

Q: What is the Right to Vote?

Under our union's old rules, delegates to the BLET convention elected National Division officers.

Under the new rules, every member will be mailed a ballot to vote for our union's President and all other National Division officers.

The Right to Vote holds our union's top officers accountable directly to the members.

This system is almost identical to one our parent union, the Teamsters, has used since 1991. Other international unions, including the Steelworkers (USW), Mine Workers (UMWA), and Machinists (IAM), all have this one-member, one-vote system of elections.

Q: What would the new proposal do?

If the new proposal is approved by our union's initiative process, then it would restore the old system of voting and eliminate the members' Right to Vote.

Members would not be mailed a ballot to vote for our union's top officers. Instead, delegates at the BLET Convention would vote for top officers.

Q: Will I get a chance to vote on this proposal before it is approved?

There are three steps to approve the initiative.

First, divisions representing 25% of the BLET membership have to take action at a meeting to approve taking away our right to vote. If not enough divisions approve it within six months, the initiative dies.

If it clears that hurdle, a ballot will be sent to every member to vote on the initiative.

If the majority vote to take away our vote, then the Teamster General President would have to

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approve the change. In 2006, Teamster President Hoffa approved the initiative that gave members the right to vote.

We will only lose the Right to Vote if this initiative clears all these hurdles.

Q: What can I do right now to stop these people from taking away my right to vote?

You can speak out against the initiative at your next division meeting. Your division can choose to vote against it or simply ignore it. And make copies of this Q&A to educate other members about the Right to Vote.

Q: Isn't it better to let our delegates choose our top officers?

The delegates to our last convention proved that they do not always make the best decisions. Three long-standing incumbent officers that they chose are now gone in disgrace for misusing their union office for personal gain.

Delegates will still play an extremely important role under the new system. A delegate who has examined campaign literature, attended debates and other forums at the convention, and questioned candidates directly will now be able to competently inform their members about the candidates and the issues, and encourage members to participate and vote.

Q: Doesn't the delegate system make sure that every member is represented equally?

No. The BLET's delegate system is heavily weighted in favor of the local divisions with the fewest number of members.

The old delegate system permitted divisions with as few as 12 members to cast an equally weighted vote with all other divisions, except the very largest.

Under our new democratic system of one-member, one-vote elections, every member who chooses to vote will be represented and have their vote counted equally.

Division 98 argues that their proposal would restore "representative democracy" to the union. But under the U.S. system of representative democracy, every citizen gets to vote for the President and their representatives. Isn't that the way it should be in our union, too?

Q: Only a few members vote in elections. Why should we bother with a membership election?

First of all, it's not true that most members don't vote in every election. Over half of our members voted in the election to merge with the Teamsters.

Still, it is a sad fact that a majority of members don't participate in our union most of the time. But the Division 98 proposal does not help.

A strong union needs the participation of as many members as possible. Having the Right to Vote encourages members to get involved and take an interest in their union. And it will encourage delegates to help inform the members back home.

Taking away the Right to Vote sends the message to members that they do not have to be involved—someone else will take care of their problems. And that person will not have to answer directly to the members!

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Is that the message we want to send to our members?

One final point: only 48 percent of U.S. registered voters voted in the 2006 congressional elections. Is that a reason not to hold those elections, too?

Q: Aren't elections too expensive?

Sure, an election will cost money. But so did the old system of electing officers at the convention.

In fact, the daily cost of hosting an international union convention is enormous. Without the old delegate system of elections, the BLET Convention can now be shortened by at least one day—saving the union hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Q: Division 98 says the new election process will prevent rank-and-file members from running for office. Is that true?

That's laughable. Under the delegate system, there never was a truly viable candidate for national office from the rank-and-file. They were weeded out by the good-old boys network at the convention.

Under the new election rules, candidates will be able to post a link to their campaign website on the BLET website—giving all candidates the chance to communicate directly with the members for very little cost.

The best chance that a rank-and-file member has is running on a slate under the new one-member, one-vote rules.

Q: Are the elections rules too complicated?

No. The point of the rules is to prevent cheating and irregularities, to make sure union officers do not illegally use the resources of our union to campaign, and to keep outsiders and the rail carriers from influencing our election procedure.

It's clear from the recent scandals in our union that we need such procedures and policies in place to prevent wrong-doing—and a system to hold wrong-doers accountable.

It was a lack of financial rules and accountability at the National Division that allowed three senior incumbent officers to get away with using their office for personal gain.

Q: Can next year's rank-and-file election be canceled?

Maybe, if the Division 98 proposal passes and is approved by Hoffa before the next convention in October 2010.

Officials of Division 98 have stated that their goal is to prevent any direct election of BLET officers.