

Teamsters have earned their freedom

by The Detroit News

The matter of federal oversight of the Teamsters crept briefly into the Democratic presidential campaign this week, when U.S. Sen. Barack Obama told the Wall Street Journal the Justice Department's meddling in union affairs has "run its course."

Later, after Obama backtracked and clarified that he wasn't making a "blanket commitment" to ending oversight, Sen. Hillary Clinton pounced. Will he end the oversight or won't he? Clinton asked, implying that favoring the Teamsters' freedom suggest a softness by Obama.

It's an odd position for Clinton, who is trying to keep her dying campaign alive by citing her appeal to blue-collar working stiffs. Her affinity must extend only to those whose union endorsed her; the Teamsters are backing Obama. But aside from the political sniping, the issue ought to stay alive. The federal government has had its claws in the Teamsters for 19 years even though it's been nearly a decade since there's been a hint that the Teamsters union is any more susceptible to organized crime than any other labor union.

In fact, under President Jim Hoffa, the Teamsters have been model union citizens. They've purged themselves of mobsters and put in place effective oversight policies.

And yet the Justice Department just can't let go.

The oversight began in 1989 to settle a racketeering lawsuit. It was necessary then. Despite throwing a good number of Teamsters bosses in jail over the years, the union never seemed to get the message that crime doesn't pay.

But it's a different union today. A 1999 congressional report, a Harvard study and an internal audit commissioned by the union all found that the Independent Review Board appointed to keep watch on the Teamsters is no longer necessary. The only plausible explanation for the board's continued existence is the bureaucracy that has grown up around it. Union members pay \$3 million to \$6 million a year to keep the board's staff going.

Obama may have been paying back the Teamsters for the union's endorsement when he raised the oversight issue. But he had it right.

The Teamsters union has done what it was asked to do. It has earned its freedom.

The union should be allowed to run its own affairs without the help of government lawyers.

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