

International Brotherhood of Teamsters General President Candidates Forum

Moderator:

Lisa Nicole Wallace

**US Video Assignment Manager for the Associated Press and
the 114th President of the National Press Club**

Candidates:

Sean M. O'Brien

**IBT General President candidate on the
O'Brien-Zuckerman Teamsters United Slate**

Steve Vairma

**IBT General President candidate on the
Vairma/Herrera Teamster Power Slate**

Location:

**The National Press Club
Washington, D.C.**

Date: Wednesday, September 1, 2021

*Transcript By
CastingWords*

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Lisa Nicole Matthews: Good evening and welcome to the National Press Club. I'm Lisa Nicole Matthews, the 114th president of the club and US Video Assignment Manager for the Associated Press. I'm also tonight's moderator for this first debate between the two candidates vying for a five-year term as General President of the 1.4-million-member Teamsters Union.

This debate was organized by both the club's Headliners team and the Independent Office of the Election Supervisor for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The Office of the Election Supervisor oversees the union's election process. Next month, ballots will be mailed to Teamsters in the United States and Canada, and the vote count will begin November 15th.

Richard Mark is the Election Supervisor. He is here with us this evening. Mr. Mark also served as Election Supervisor for the 2011 and the 2016 Teamsters Officer Elections during a period when the Union was under federal oversight.

While no longer under federal supervision, the Teamsters Union has agreed to continue direct election of its top officers and have those elections supervised in the same manner.

Let me now introduce the two candidates for general president and my colleagues on the panel of journalists who will be asking questions. Representing the O'Brien-Zuckerman/Teamsters United Slate is Teamsters International Vice President-East, Sean M. O'Brien.

He is a fourth-generation Teamster and President of the Local 25 and Secretary-Treasurer of Joint Council 10, both in Boston. Welcome, Mr. O'Brien.

Sean O'Brien: Thank you.

Ms. Matthews: Representing the Vairma-Herrera Teamsters Power Slate is Teamsters International Vice President At-Large, Steve Vairma. He has served as Secretary-Treasurer of Local 455 in Denver since 1996 and as President of the Joint Council 3, which represents members in eight states. Welcome, Mr. Vairma.

Steve Vairma: Thank you.

Ms. Matthews: Let me now turn to tonight's panelists. To my left is Harold Meyerson, Editor at-Large for the "American Prospect." Harold has reported on labor unions throughout his career and participated in past Teamsters debate forums.

To my right is Ian Kullgren, a labor reporter with "Bloomberg." Ian covers the intersection between labor, politics, and the economy.

We have a live audience here in Washington at the National Press Club that includes members of the Press Club, credentialed journalists, and many Teamster Union members.

In addition to questions from our panelists, those in the room can submit questions in writing by filling out the cards that have been supplied and passing them to Jamie Horwitz, who is in the front row behind me.

Questions can be submitted by those watching online by emailing headliners@press.org with the word "Teamsters" and the subject line "For consideration."

Tonight's debate is an opportunity for thousands of Teamsters members as well as the news media and general public to hear from the two rival slates and their top candidates. Whomever wins the election this fall will introduce a new era for the Teamsters. This is the first time in 23 years that the Hoffa name is not on the ballot.

Candidates, you know the rules. Audience, you may not, so I'm going to go over them. Each candidate will have two minutes for opening statements. The order of the opening statements has been determined by the drawing of lots just a short time ago.

Mr. Vairma will get the opening statement. Mr. O'Brien will get to do the closing statement. When we begin the question and answer period, as moderator, I will direct the flow of all questions and recognize each panelist alternating between candidates.

Since Mr. Vairma has the opening statement, the first question will go to Mr. O'Brien. The candidate to whom the question is addressed will have 90 seconds to respond. The other candidate is given 45 seconds for a rebuttal or comment.

The candidate first questioned will then have 30 seconds for rebuttal. If I think an answer needs further clarification or follow-up, I may allow for an extension of discussion or direct one of the other panelists to continue the line of questioning for an additional 45 seconds.

Following the question and answer period, each candidate will have two minutes for closing statements. We do have a timekeeper in the back of the room. The candidates and panelists clearly see the time displayed.

When time is up, if a candidate is still speaking, I will stop the answer to keep the debate moving. I may let a candidate finish their response, but not a paragraph, OK?

Finally, let me caution Teamster members here in the audience against any outburst or action that may take away speaking time from our candidates. This can lead to sanctions from the Election Supervisor for your slate and candidate.

With that, let's begin with the opening statements from Mr. Vairma. We'll begin with you.

Mr. Vairma: Alrighty. Well, thank you. First of all, let me say what an honor it is to be here today giving this debate and giving these presentations. As said earlier, for the first time in 22 years, there is no incumbent running for the General President position. Jim Hoffa is retiring.

This is a union that is now in transition and is moving into the future with new ideas and new direction.

I am seeking your vote for General President. I believe that I am the best candidate for this job, to lead this great Union going forward. I have assembled a team of great candidates—great candidates, diverse in race, ethnicity, gender, and most importantly, in industry.

Ron Herrera, the candidate from the Teamster Power slate, and I, are seeking, are the only two candidates that are incumbents in office today. The rest of the Teamster Power slate are seeking office for the very first time.

These are candidates that bring with them not just diversity and knowledge of the industries but a wealth of titles, and also their diversity and their abilities to come forward with new ideas, new suggestions, and opportunities, exciting it with new energy.

Our focus is in organizing. With the candidates that we're bringing forward today, their focus has always been in organizing, in organizing in our core industries. It's about empowering and energizing our members in every aspect of this union. Believe in organizing in the core industry and pay our policies with our member's and play no politics with our member's contracts.

On October 4th, you're going to be receiving a ballot. It's time to make a decision, a very important decision as we go forward in the future of the next five years of this Union is in your hands.

I believe if you do your research, you do your homework, you check the facts, you check the records, and look at our records and our progress over the past nine years as officers in this local union, you will truly see that we are the best slate to represent you going forward.

Ms. Matthews: Time.

Mr. O'Brien: Thank you. Good evening, brothers, and sisters. My name is Sean O'Brien. I'm a proud, fourth-generation Teamster out of the greatest local union in the entire country, Local 25. I'm a 31-year Teamster and I came out of the rank-and-file. I came out of the Construction Division.

The Teamsters Union has improved many families' lives like mine and others. We want to make sure that we continue that theme moving forward. My opponent has stated clearly that Hoffa is not running but that doesn't mean his values and his bad habits won't continue under this leadership.

I've assembled a team that has diversity, that has knowledge, that has core values instilled in them throughout the Teamsters Union. We have generational knowledge and we're going to be second to none.

This Union -- the great thing about this Union is that we have a choice, and our members, our rank-and-file members who truly matter in this whole process, will have a choice starting October 4th. We believe that we are the team for the future. We believe that we can take this International, make it bigger, faster, stronger.

We, too, have proven leadership on our slate. We, too, have the ability to organize but the one thing that separates us from our opponent is we're all about reuniting this Union. We're not about creating division.

We're about having a division to ensure that the next generation of Teamsters are armed and willing and educated on the core values of what being a Teamster is all about. I'm here tonight to debate the issues. I'm here tonight to instill our platform for our rank-and-file members, on behalf of our rank-and-file members.

I'm not going to get into the mud-slinging or anything else. I want to debate the issues. I want to give the rank-and-file members the clear choice. If you're happy with the way the direction this International has gone over the last 10 years and you're happy with status quo, this is your guy. This is his team.

But, if you want fight, if you want vigilance, if you want the ability to organize the unorganized and take on our biggest threat, Teamsters United, our slate, 2021 is the only team.

Ms. Matthews: Thank you. Let's now turn to our panel. We're going to begin with Harold Meyerson. Harold.

Harold Meyerson: Thank you, Lisa. Welcome. This is a question for Mr. O'Brien. As we meet here tonight, COVID is still stalking the country. There are a number of employers, and many of them municipal governments, that are requiring masks on the job, and some of them are beginning to require vaccines on the job.

You have members who are school bus drivers, firefighters, policemen, who may be encountering those kinds of mandates for vaccines. What would the Teamsters' position, what do you think the Teamsters' position should be when your members encounter that kind of mandate?

Mr. O'Brien: Clearly, I think both my opponent and I would agree that our members, most of whom are essential workers, did a tremendous job through that pandemic. And unfortunately, that pandemic is not over. But again, when you are trying to mandate people for vaccinations -- and, personally, I got vaccinated.

I support vaccinations, but when it comes to mandates, especially in organized labor, represented workers covered under a collective bargaining agreement, our position is clear. We think that's subject to bargaining. We think that employers need to sit down and bargain, bargain over that issue.

Look, everybody has a personal choice on whether they want to be vaccinated or not be vaccinated. You know, some people have religious beliefs. Some people have autoimmune medical conditions that they're not certain of.

But the one thing I'm certain of is that, whether you choose to be vaccinated or you don't be vaccinated, we've got an obligation as leaders of this International Union, both on a local level, joint council level, or international level, to ensure that we negotiate the best terms and

conditions in contracts, but also to make sure that we don't allow employers to put our members at risk of losing their jobs.

Ms. Matthews: Mr. Vairma.

Mr. Vairma: I'm also vaccinated and I believe in the vaccination, and I think that as leaders, we need to lead. And we need to encourage our Teamster members to go ahead and take the vaccination.

But if it's going to be a mandate, if they're going to mandate testing or if you're going to mandate the fact that you're going to have to take that vaccination, then you need to sit down and you need to bargain with us. It is a mandatory subject of bargaining, on that, we can agree.

The position I am taking, I'm not just talking about doing that. I've already engaged in that fight already at United Airlines, where they're trying to mandate that every one of our members, under the Railway Labor Act, under that collective bargaining agreement, that mandatory vaccinations will be required under the threat of losing their jobs. And that is not acceptable to me.

That's not acceptable in any situation. It is a mandatory subject of bargaining. We are going to hold them accountable for that. We are preparing to put together a TRO if necessary...

Ms. Matthews: Time.

Mr. Vairma: ...to get them to the table.

Ms. Matthews: Time. Ian, you're next up.

Ian Kullgren: Mr. Vairma, both you and your opponent mentioned diversity in your opening statements. And this past year has brought a lively debate within the labor movement about whether to support police unions.

In fact, the Teamster's Legal Defense Fund still offers insurance protection for officers facing criminal misconduct investigations both on and off the job. My question is, should this program continue in a post-George Floyd America, especially when the Teamster's leadership, including you and your opponent, continues to be overwhelmingly white?

Mr. Vairma: Well, first of all, let me say that I believe our ticket is extremely diverse. I think it's probably, historically, the most diverse ticket in the history of this labor movement. Of course, we respect police officers, but we have to have these tough discussions, as we go forward here.

These social justice issues are extremely important to our members. I do believe also that black lives matter, but we also have to have a diversified group.

And when I talked earlier about diversity and race in gender and in industry, it is critically important that we have these discussions.

And we've assembled a team that can have these discussions, can sit down and talk about those issues. They're difficult issues. They're issues that affect us in society.

We have members in the law enforcement industry. We have members, of course, of color. It's important we have these discussions and start looking for solutions and try and cultivate those solutions. And I think we have put together the best team to be able to do that.

Ms. Matthews: Mr. O'Brien?

Mr. O'Brien: Yes. I think diversity obviously is a key to the success of any organization. And I think we have assembled a diverse team as well. One thing's for certain that once Teamsters United O'Brien-Zuckerman win, we will be the most diverse General Executive Board in the history of the Teamsters. However, Black lives do matter. And we've been clear on that.

And you know the great thing about the Teamsters Union, we represent our members no matter what. We're going to continue to represent our members whether they're police officers, whether they're affiliated with Black Lives Matter or any group for that matter.

The beauty of the Teamsters Union, we've been fighting for social and economic justice for 100 years. And we're going to continue to fight. And I'm proud of that. I'm proud of our record on that. I'm proud of the future. At the end of the day, we have to represent our members regardless of race, religion, creed, or sexual orientation.

Ms. Matthews: Time.

Mr. O'Brien: And that's what the O'Brien-Zuckerman 2021 slate is all about.

Ms. Matthews: Thank you. So it's my turn. A question from the AP's Tom Krisher. And this is regarding Amazon. Obviously, Amazon is building a network that's more and more replacing companies like UPS, which is, basically, the largest employer of Teamsters members.

If Amazon is successful, it will cost UPS significant business and could cut into the Union's membership. Do you, Mr. Vairma, see this organizing effort as the key to the Union's future? And, secondly, what happens if they don't win?

Mr. Vairma: Well, first of all, I think that organizing Amazon is a critical part of this Union and going forward. We have currently established a program, we have established a division at the International Union, that its sole focus is going to be on Amazon. And we've appointed a director to that division, an individual by the name of Randy Korgan out of Teamsters Local 1932.

And that's going to be his focus because we have to do, we have to tackle this giant. And I've done it in my own backyard in the state of Colorado, where we've taken Amazon on in front of the city council over in the city of Aurora, Colorado, in which we were able to shut down that operation and keep it from coming forward.

There's a lot of ways we have to take on this battle with Amazon, but I can't tip the hand and I can't tell everybody how we're going to do it. I can't give the playbook to Amazon. But I believe

in the director that we've appointed to run that division. I believe in his vision of how we're going to tackle Amazon, what direction we need to go, how we need to move forward in that program.

It's a solid program. It's one that needs to go forward. And for the future of the organized labor, for the future of UPS, we have to succeed in organizing Amazon.

Ms. Matthews: Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: Great, I agree with my opponent on that, Amazon needs to be organized. It's going to be our most vulnerable threat that we've seen in organized labor. However, this should have been a vision 10 years ago, when they started out as a 20,000 person organization book club.

Now it's 400,000 employees, and it's a global country controlling many facets of the Teamsters Union and companies that are represented by the Teamsters Union. I just don't understand why there wasn't vision and foresight prior. But with that said, we're going to have to do several different things.

I as well have been doing a lot of work, not just the last six months because it's election season. I've been doing a prior going to city and town governments surrounding areas, looking to...

Ms. Matthews: Time. Time. Time. I have an additional question on Amazon I want to ask each of you. The last union push at Amazon failed. So, what would each of you do differently to convince workers that they need a union? Mr. Vairma, first.

Mr. Vairma: Okay. Again, you have to look like the members that you're trying to organize. That was what is so important about us having the diversity of our team on the Teamster Power Slate, number one. I'm not going to criticize the RWDSU and the efforts that they made. They made a big attempt, they went after it. We think there's a different way you have to go about it.

We have to be disciplined. We have to take it on nationally, engaging local unions. I've made my entire career in taking on these kinds of fights, where we fight smart, where we bring people together, where we form huge coalitions, whether it be other Teamsters, whether it be other unions, whether it be the society, whether it be the public.

Regardless of what that is, you build these strong coalitions across the country in order for us to succeed, in order for us to make in-way.

Ms. Matthews: Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: I think – I'll just respond to that because a lot of what Mr. Vairma said, I think we agree with and I think that's a core value. But more importantly, we need to negotiate strong contracts in the industries we currently represent.

We need to make sure we negotiate strong contracts regardless of the threat. To make certain that these workers are looking at what a product looks like when you're under a collective bargaining agreement.

If we're negotiating concessionary contracts and we're negotiating substandard agreements, why would any member, why would any person want to join the Teamsters Union? We have to set the bar so high.

In the last UPS negotiation where that contract was implemented, where there were concessions, didn't help us in organizing. We need to make certain that we look to hold ourselves to the highest standard, and then encourage these workers to join a union and have a product that they'll be proud of to work under.

Ms. Matthews: Thank you. Harold.

Mr. Meyerson: Let's get to something that you probably don't agree on. I've been doing these debates here once every five years for a decade and a half now.

And one thing I've noticed is that usually, the insurgent slate consists at the top of people who were formerly part of the administration slate 5 years earlier, or 10 years earlier, or what have you. This is a recurrent pattern. So, I'm trying to interpret this.

Does this mean that if you stick with the administration, at some point, you will just find it impossible to continue, or does it mean that Teamster officials are very ambitious or not loyal?

I'd like both of you to give your interpretation of this ongoing [laughs] phenomenon. So, which one goes first again?

Ms. Matthews: We can begin with Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. Meyerson: Let's begin with Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: There's no, there's no – it's clear that I'm ambitious and I want to run this Union. I want to run this Union to the fullest extent with the best interests of our rank and file members.

There's no secret that I was on the Hoffa slate. I was teammates with my opponent, but that does not bound me for life to be part of something that I lost faith in, that I lost confidence in.

I'm running this Union because I truly believe in it. I've dedicated my entire life to the Teamsters Union and I'm willing to do that. I'm willing to take on that fight and I'm willing to embrace anybody that doesn't have the same beliefs, anybody that has a difference of opinion to come up with a solution, a solution that's in the best interests of our members.

Ms. Matthews: Mr. Vairma.

Mr. Vairma: Yeah, I'm not sure that I agree with my opponent. I'm not sure that I think that that's true. I think that what has happened over time is when we run for office in seeking election, unfortunately, my opponent feels that if you don't agree with them, that he'll take the challenge to you and he'll browbeat you.

And I think that that's not the way you do business here. You can have differences, you can have disagreements and go forward, but you don't punish people who don't agree with you and don't agree with your philosophies.

But I also got to say on UPS and on the Amazon question that if you use politics and you keep demonizing one of the best contracts in our entire Union and you keep demonizing that contract, how do you think you're going to organize people like Amazon when the first thing that they throw out there is, "Your people think that the Amazon – that the UPS contract is the worst agreement in there. Why should we join your Union"?

Ms. Matthews: Time. Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: See, I just want to point out, instead of finding a solution to the problem, my opponent continues to take the path of least resistance and look to blame other people. The reality of it is this, we need to organize Amazon. We need to –

And I disagree with punishing people, because look, when you – and I look at the Hoffa administration currently and Steve Vairma as one and the same -- when you disagree or you have an original thought of your own which is in the best interests of the members, you get punished, you get terminated, you get relieved of your duties, regardless of the job that you have done.

So if anybody wants to make those accusations, you should look in the mirror.

Ms. Matthews: Okay. Next question goes to Ian.

Mr. Kullgren: Mr. Vairma, I'm glad you brought up UPS, because there's been a lot of discussion over the so-called two-thirds rule, which, in 2018, allowed Teamsters' leadership to override the will of a majority of members who voted against the contract.

Is the two-thirds rule undemocratic? Should it be repealed? Why or why not?

Mr. Vairma: First of all, the two-thirds rule has been repealed. It is no longer a part of our constitution. It's gone. So I want to talk a little bit, let's go back in time and give a little bit of history.

So, back in 2013, my opponent was in charge of the UPS supplements in the contract negotiations. We weren't able to get the – he wasn't able to get those supplements done and they had to implement those supplements on those local unions and impose those contracts but it wasn't imposing the national contract; it was imposing the supplemental contracts.

This last go around, excuse me, in 2016, at the convention, there was an opportunity to change the two-thirds rule and my opponent ruled against the two-thirds rule being changed. It wasn't an issue at that time. We hadn't faced an implementation of a national agreement.

In this last go-around was the first time we faced less than 50 percent of our members voting on that contract. And we ended up with a 48 percent vote. That is the first time that the actual language of that constitution was imposed on United Parcel Service.

None of the candidates that were seeking General President felt that the two-thirds rule was fair. Nobody felt comfortable with the fact that that contract had been imposed on our UPS members. And every single person seeking office at the convention was looking at an elimination of the two-thirds rule.

The differences were, once we took the five proposals and had Gary Witlen from the International work on coming to a consolidated consensus, a consolidated agreement, one that made sense, and built in the Teamster Power slate concerns of if there's less than 50 percent of the people voting, there has to be a second vote...

Ms. Matthews: Time.

Mr. Vairma: ...on the right to strike.

Mr. O'Brien: First off, in 2013, I was in charge of the supplements and three of them didn't pass and we had to implement them. But my opponent here didn't speak up then and he certainly didn't speak up in 2018. If you hear what my opponent just said, the majority of our members didn't vote.

So again, he's looking to blame our members for not voting. My position was clear. The contract was voted down. Two things should have happened. Should've went back to the table or struck the employer. Unfortunately, that didn't happen and our members got stuck with a contract that they voted down.

Now, if we want to talk about the two-thirds rule – look, we eliminated that two-thirds rule. I'll agree to that at the convention, and when I say we, it's my team, Teamsters United, negotiating with the current administration Gary Witlen...

Ms. Matthews: Time.

Mr. O'Brien: ...without any input from Steve.

[laughter]

Ms. Matthews: Mr. Vairma, would you like to comment?

Mr. Vairma: Yeah, again, I disagree. I mean that – the elimination of the two-thirds rule and the balance of that entire proposal -- and it wasn't just the issue with the two-thirds rule, the issue of passage on that -- it would not have happened. It would have been defeated. It wasn't until we endorsed it from the Teamster Power Slate, and from myself, that the two-thirds rule passed and the proposal passed at the constitution committee.

Ms. Matthews: Do you want to follow?

Mr. Kullgren: I think I'm good.

Ms. Matthews: You think you're good?

Mr. Kullgren: I think I'm good, yeah.

Ms. Matthews: Harold. No, I'm going to skip. You, go.

Mr. Meyerson: All right. Then, who is this for?

Ms. Matthews: It would be for Mr. Vairma.

Mr. Meyerson: Mr. Vairma, both of you have extolled the diversity of your slates but it's clear that in the November election for President, not of this union, of the United States last November, a lot of working-class folks voted for Donald Trump rather than Joe Biden.

Particularly, if you look at the polls, white working-class folks, a number of them union members, union members of all races, some voted for Donald Trump. And, uh, I don't doubt that what's true of union members, in general, is true of the Teamsters.

You had some folks voting for Trump, some of your members, instead of Joe Biden. How do you analyze that? What's behind that? Are the Democrats too far left? Are some of your members irretrievably racist? What do you make of that?

Mr. Vairma: No, I most certainly would not call our overwhelming members being racist. But, to answer your question, first of all, the Teamsters are unique. We actually solicit our membership to find out who we want to endorse in a presidential election.

Now, I think we have our own individual concerns, our own individual preferences. I think my particular concern was concerning the Butch Lewis Act, was making sure that we protected the pensions of our members. I felt that Joe Biden was going to be the best candidate to get that done but, at that point, we solicit our 1.3 million members, 1.4 million members, to ensure that we get all of their input coming back into the International Union.

We look at their input, look at what their concerns are before we make that decision and before we make that endorsement.

Ms. Matthews: Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: The Teamsters Union, certainly, is not racist. You know a lot of times, our members, because of the job we do as leaders, we negotiate contracts that our members sometimes think are responsible for politicians. Sometimes our members make choices for politicians based on what their personal issues are.

I know that in my Local Union and in my Joint Council, we do the same. We make certain that we poll our members to find out what direction they want to go. But more importantly, we want to encourage, as leaders, not to pick candidates based upon personal issues but pick candidates based upon how are they going to help the working class of America? How are they going to help our members that go to work every single day?

You know, it's unfortunate that a lot of our members voted for Trump, but I think, under the Biden Administration...

Ms. Matthews: Time.

Mr. O'Brien: ...thankfully, for the two senators in Georgia...

Ms. Matthews: Time.

Mr. O'Brien: ...we fixed pensions.

Mr. Meyerson: Can I follow?

Ms. Matthews: Most certainly.

Mr. Meyerson: How would you go forward in trying to help your members who did vote for Donald Trump maybe to come to the same position that both of you, and the Teamsters Union as such, advocated? What would you say to them now? What would you say to them when you become President?

Mr. O'Brien: I would say we made the right choice. We made the right choice in Biden. Under his first order of business, with the American Recovery Act, he was able to fund pensions until 2051. That wouldn't have happened unless we had retirees, boots on the ground, rank-and-file members starting this process.

But most importantly, electing democratic senators out of Georgia, working with Local 728 to ensure that that would be passed. So I think we've got to do a better job of educating our members, educating our members on how important it is to make the right choice, and what happens when we make the right choice. And we can point to that most recent victory, or those two victories, in Georgia.

Ms. Matthews: Mr. Vairma, would you like to comment on that?

Mr. Vairma: Again, so I thought that would have been my comment in the first place. However, I do agree that it's important to educate our members on what the results of that election really were, and get them to understand. You know, it's not a matter of we're shunning their position or their political beliefs. It's a matter of doing what's right for the Teamsters movement.

Our job, as elected officials, is to take care of the Teamsters Union, to take care of our members' rights, and make sure that the union rights of all members are protected, first and foremost.

And in this particular election, the biggest and most glaring concern was our pension and making sure that we got the pension relief that we needed to protect our members and protect all of our retirees. And that was Joe Biden that was going to get the job done for us.

Ms. Matthews: Thank you. Ian.

Mr. Kullgren: Mr. O'Brien, you were briefly suspended in 2013 for making, allegedly making threatening comments against TDU members, who now support your candidacy for this office,

who are running for office in Rhode Island. Is that the kind of conduct we can expect from you as President?

Mr. O'Brien: Well, there's no doubt that I was suspended for remarks that I made. And, you know, I regret those remarks. However, I complied with my suspension. I complied with the terms and conditions of it. And I moved forward. And the one thing about our slate, and the one thing about me is I always take a negative situation and I look for a positive.

I was able to build bridges with Matt Taibi from the Local 251 after that. I was able to build bridges with Teamsters. At the end of the day, whether you're affiliated with TDU, Teamsters United, or any other group, we are all Teamsters and we should all embrace one another for the betterment of the Brotherhood of the Teamsters and the betterment of the rank-and-file members that we represent.

There's no doubt that I'm a competitor. I'm an athlete, and I compete. And I compete to win. And sometimes when you're a competitor, you know, you lose sight of what's important and you lose sight of what's the necessary task at hand.

But moving forward, I've proven that I've been able to build bridges. I've reached across the aisle and embrace people, embrace members that don't have the same thought process, that don't have the same agenda with a common goal of representing our members in the rank-and-file day in and day out.

Ms. Matthews: Mr. Vairma.

Mr. Vairma: I guess, it's unfortunate to hear that response because I don't believe that there's any place in this Teamsters Union to have people that threaten other members, I don't think that that's something that can be excused. The fact is it happened.

Now the decision has to be made by the rank-and-file membership to decide whether or not that that's OK. I am the only candidate standing up here today that has not been under investigation for anything, has not been under investigation by the IRB, by the IOP, by IDO, or anybody else.

I have never had a bad record, never been under suspension, and certainly – certainly – have never been disciplined for any reason, whatsoever. And whether it's acceptable or not to the rank-and-file, that's a decision the rank-and-file has to make.

Ms. Matthews: You want to do a follow Ian?

Mr. Kullgren: Yes. Mr. Vairma, your opponent has several times already tonight said that you would, are essentially an extension of the Hoffa leadership, which obviously is no stranger to controversy itself. Do you think that is a fair comparison? And if not, what would you do differently than President Hoffa has done so far?

Mr. Vairma: That's a very broad question. But the answer is I am my own person. Do I embrace the fact that Jim Hoffa has elected to endorse me, and endorsed my candidacy, and endorsed the Teamster Power Slate? I embrace that. I've had a lot of accomplishments under Jim Hoffa.

I spent nine years on the General Executive Board working for this International Union, working for our rank and file members across the country. And we've built some incredible programs over these past nine years, and we've had some tremendous success. Whether you like Jim Hoffa or you hate Jim Hoffa, bottom line is, we've had tremendous success in rebuilding this Union.

I can still remember, and I happened to be around back in 1991 when this union was on the verge of bankruptcy. And Jim Hoffa and Tom Keegel, and also Jim Hoffa and Ken Hall, restored this local union to where it is today.

Ms. Matthews: Time. Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: Could you repeat the question, because I don't think my opponent answered it?

Mr. Kullgren: The question was, is Mr. Vairma an extension of the Hoffa leadership, leadership style, and why or why not?

Mr. O'Brien: He clearly is an extension of the Hoffa leadership style. I mean look, he made a statement earlier that said he's never been investigated, never been in trouble. Well, that's easy when you're not doing anything when you're not representing your members. Right?

But when you're out there and you're being aggressive, and you're out there taking calculated risks for the betterment of your members, of course there's going to be controversy. And you know, he sits here like all righteous. The architect of his slate, which is proven in a transcript, the architect of his slate by the way, he wasn't the first choice. He was the third choice that Hoffa endorsed.

The architect of his slate is under investigation, well, is on the verge of getting thrown out of the Teamsters Union. But my colleague over here voted for a substandard suspension several months ago at the General Executive Board, when his architect of his slate violated his suspension. Unlike me, who served my suspension accordingly.

Ms. Matthews: Time. Mr. Vairma. You want to ask a question?

Mr. Meyerson: No. Go ahead.

Ms. Matthews: I'm going to ask a question now. This question comes from Mark Solomon with FreightWaves Magazine. He's a trade magazine. He's a senior writer there. And it's specifically for Mr. Vairma. You represent the status quo and are considered less militant than Sean O'Brien and Fred Zuckerman.

UPS members who represent about one-quarter of all Teamsters members voted for Zuckerman over Jimmy Hoffa in the 2016 election. How do you convince UPS members to pivot towards you in the upcoming election, when they were lukewarm at best about Hoffa five years ago, and Zuckerman is O'Brien's running mate?

Mr. Vairma: I think that's simple. I think with United Parcel Service, no different than anything else we represent in our union.

And by the way, United Parcel Services is extremely important in this union. We got 325,000 members, but we also have almost another million members in the white paper industry that want to know that their voices are going to be heard by this administration as we go forward, and they're going to be heard.

But we do it by fighting smart. We do it by educating our members. We do it by engaging our members. We make sure that they understand the issues, and we take politics out of contract negotiations. The Vote No campaign down at UPS was a farce. The Vote No campaign is what made members not want to vote on their contract. I believe that's what caused a 48 percent voter turnout.

When we said vote no on a contract before we even exchanged one single proposal with the employer is ridiculous. And I think that that had an impact on what our members did at the bargaining table and what they did during the ratification meeting.

They decided not to turn out, because they had been suppressed. Hearing about this controversy of vote no, vote no, vote no, when we didn't even have a package in front of them for them to take a look at.

So I think that by being transparent, making sure that our members understand the issues, making sure that our members are educated to what those issues are going to be, include them in the process, make sure we engage them in our process, is how we're going to have the success at United Parcel Service.

Ms. Matthews: Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: Yeah, the true success of the next round of negotiations is going to have to have membership inclusion, not exclusion, like has been the practice in the past. And, you know, I'm glad that my opponent recognizes that he thinks the last UPS agreement was the best agreement ever.

We started our two-tier wage system. We allowed people to deliver packages out of their personal vehicles. We have more subcontractor now than ever. So why would our members vote for a contract like that? And again, he consistently is standing here blaming our members and everybody else for a low turnout.

Steve, you need to face the reality that our members have lost faith in the organization, and it's up to us, OZ 2021, to restore that faith and restore the power, but more important, restore the fear in these employers moving forward on betterment of our members.

Mr. Vairma: And again, I would say, don't put words in my mouth. That's not what I said. I didn't blame the membership for the UPS contract. What I blamed was your role playing politics with the UPS contract, and there is no place to be playing politics when it comes to people's contract negotiations.

Mr. O'Brien: Steve, number one...

Mr. Vairma: So don't put words in my...

Ms. Matthews: That's a rebuttal. Okay. Mr. O'Brien, five years ago, the Iron Workers Union announced paid maternity leave benefit, which was a pretty big deal. Some construction unions have followed suit, but it's not that overwhelming. This is specific to the construction industry trade union, but there might be some Teamsters industries where this applies.

So, wondering, what are your plans for parental leave for Teamster Union members?

Mr. O'Brien: I can speak for Massachusetts right now, my experience with it. I believe that everybody should be afforded the same right for parental leave no matter what, and we will fight and negotiate that in contracts moving forward.

But because of our political relationships in the state of Massachusetts, and because we listen to our members and we realize what's important, we were able to get Family Leave Act passed last year that ensures that people that have children, whether it's the spouse, get afforded the same rights moving forward.

We have conditions under that legislation that allow for bonding with newborns both for the spouses and the person delivering the baby. So we have tremendous experience in that, and I think that should be included moving forward in every collective bargaining agreement. It should be a boilerplate demand.

Ms. Matthews: Mr. Vairma.

Mr. Vairma: I agree. I think we've been doing that for some time now in a lot of our collective bargaining agreements where we have been seeking paternity and maternity leaves, where our folks believe that it's both, that it's a combination of both.

And I think COVID's made it even more apparent that we have to do more in this industry as women in the workforce face different kinds of crises than we've faced in the past. And I think COVID-19 has illuminated those things.

And so I think that by the team that I have assembled, we're prepared to start dealing with those issues, those core value issues now, and protecting our members, and protecting those workers and their workplace.

Ms. Matthews: Okay. Harold.

Mr. Meyerson: For Mr. O'Brien. The Teamsters are not members of the AFL-CIO. In 2005, they were one of seven unions that formed a different quasi-federation, Change to Win. Five of those seven unions have since gone back into the AFL-CIO, but the Teamsters and SEIU have not.

There was some bad blood between President Hoffa and AFL-CIO leaders over the question of whether they had surreptitiously engaged in backing a rival slate, which, clearly, AFL-CIO should not do, but you will be a new leader -- either one of you -- will be a new leader at the Teamsters, and the AFL-CIO now has leadership, which wasn't, structurally, at the AFL-CIO when that event happened. How would you weigh going back into the AFL-CIO? Would that be a useful thing for the Teamsters?

Mr. O'Brien: I'm going to do what I always do. I'm going to assess the situation and make a decision that's in the best interest of our members moving forward. I believe my opponent has already committed to going into the AFL-CIO, getting back into it, but I will commit that we will be getting out of Change to Win.

But before I jump into any situation, I want to make sure that we negotiate terms and conditions that are in the betterment of our members who will be actually paying for the affiliation. Now, that doesn't stop us, right now, currently, like myself and my Local Union, from working with the AFL-CIO, or any organization, especially when it's fighting for workers' rights day in and day out.

It doesn't mean that I'm not committed to going in there or committed to going in there. I need to see what we're going to get out of it but, more importantly, what our members are going to get out of it.

Ms. Matthews: Mr. Vairma.

Mr. Vairma: I have gone on record saying I would like to put us back into the AFL-CIO, but again, I did qualify that when I made those statements.

I want to be able to meet with Liz Schuler, sit down and talk about it, see how the entry would be, take a look at whether it makes sense for our organization and for our members.

That we are going to have a voice at the table, that our voice is not going to be suppressed, that we're going to make sure all of our members' concerns are going to be heard, and they're not going to be taken down by having more people against us than for us in that organization.

It does have to make sense. We do have to make it work. But I'm absolutely interested. If we're going to take on these organizing campaigns, take on these organizations like Amazon, take on some of the global competitors that we're going to face, we need to take a look at consolidating our energy and consolidating our strength and get down to having one voice in labor.

I think that's extremely important and I need to strive for that...

Ms. Matthews: Time.

Mr. Vairma: ...and work for that.

Ms. Matthews: Rebuttal?

Mr. O'Brien: I would just like to point out one fact. A memo came out from the IBT today criticizing the AFL-CIO for raiding the marijuana industry that we represent. So before we jump into any affiliation with any organization, especially the AFL-CIO, in light of what the memo said today, I think we need to take a hard look and have those hard discussions and make certain that we respect each other's jurisdiction moving forward.

Ms. Matthews: Ian.

Mr. Kullgren: Mr. Vairma, your opponent, in his last response, mentioned committing to get out of Change to Win. Do you see any future for Change to Win, yourself, and if so, what is it?

Mr. Vairma: Yeah, I don't think that we impact Change to Win. I think that the decision, whether or not we go back into the AFL-CIO doesn't impact whether or not Change to Win continues.

I don't have a problem with an organization that's going to continue to focus on organizing in the United States, on organizing in industries, organizing in our core industries, and assisting us in doing so. So I don't have an issue with staying in Change to Win. My concern is whether or not it makes sense for us to move forward and go into the AFL-CIO.

Ms. Matthews: Response?

Mr. O'Brien: I'm clear on my position. I don't know what Change to Win has done over the last 16 years. I don't know what they're looking to do. But one thing is clear, there has been a vast majority of people that left that organization.

And I think the Teamsters Union, under strong leadership, under strong support from their rank-and-file members, regardless of their affiliations or disaffiliations, I still think that we will set the tone for how organized labor moves forward with or without affiliations. And affiliations are good. They're necessary, in some respects.

Ms. Matthews: Any rebuttal?

Mr. Vairma: No, again, I think it's important to take advantage of all organizations that are willing to look at what our core values are and what our concerns are. And our concerns are organizing and organizing very large groups of folks, large campaigns. We can't say enough when we're going to be tackling people like Amazon, companies like Amazon. We have to have folks that are in the industry that understand it and understand our concerns and are willing to assist us in those organizing efforts.

Ms. Matthews: Harold.

Mr. Meyerson: No, I just asked. It's Ian's turn.

Ms. Matthews: No, Ian just asked the question.

Mr. O'Brien: There doesn't seem to be a labor dispute here, is there?

[laughter]

Harold: We need someone to negotiate for us. Give me one of those cards. Do we know who this is from?

Ms. Matthews: No, it's a question from the audience.

Harold: A question from the audience. Pensions are extremely important to the Teamsters. What have you done in the past to help secure Teamster pensions and what solutions do you have going forward to help protect our pensions?

Mr. O'Brien: One of the biggest solutions that happened was, obviously, the American Recovery Act being passed. I want to commend everybody who worked hard on that. Now, I've been attacked because my pension fund is in critical and declining status, and it has been, prior to me being a trustee, and prior to me taking over as chairman five years ago.

What we did 11 years ago is we developed a hybrid plan that allows us to negotiate new employers into that fund, which we've been very successful in that. We've also allowed employers who are on the legacy plan to transition that, meaning they pay their withdrawal liability, stay in the fund, and our members stay at the highest accrual rate.

That's what having a plan, that's what having a vision, that's what having a future is. Now, my opponent keeps criticizing me on my pension being in critical and declining. And it's a multi-employer fund. I just don't know why he just criticizes me when he doesn't criticize the employer as well.

Ms. Matthews: Response?

Mr. Vairma: So, again, I think you take responsibility for your plan. Certainly, you were chairing that plan as it got into the critical and declining status. And I guess I have some concerns about paying your campaign manager out of a critical and declining plan \$45,000 a year when it's already having issues with funds.

But on top of that, my big concern is the fact that you did a deal to push the UPS 20 percent cut on pension plans. That was unacceptable to us, unacceptable to me, and we fought against that. Our members could not face a 20 percent cut. Our retirees take a 20 percent cut in benefits. That's inexcusable and unacceptable to me.

As General President, that will not happen in my administration. We will ensure that we fight for our member's rights, we fight for our retirees, and we make sure that their benefits are...

Ms. Matthews: Time.

Mr. Vairma: ...protected.

Ms. Matthews: Rebuttal.

Mr. O'Brien: Teamsters pension fund has been in critical and declining status since 2001 before I was even on the fund. I want to clear that up. If you want to talk about pensions, you know, you got appointed by a Godfather, Rome Aloise, to go onto the Western Conference pension fund that was in great shape. And like everything else you do, you take credit for other people's work.

But let's talk about your Local Union where you have allowed more than 25 percent of your members to be negotiated out of contracts, pension contracts that included Teamster pensions,

and into 401ks. I'm frightened if that's the path of least resistance that you're willing to take as a leader of this great International Union.

Ms. Matthews: I'm definitely going to go for that. Mr. Vairma, would you like to answer that?

Mr. Vairma: Yeah, that's absolutely false. That's a bald-faced lie. We have not negotiated anybody out of the Western Conference of Teamster's pension. Now, we have contracts where individuals are in 401ks, where our membership chose not to go into the Western Conference pension, or into any other pension. So, that was a decision that's made by our rank-and-file membership during contract negotiations.

Ms. Matthews: No. Okay, next question.

[laughter]

Ms. Matthews: Mr. O'Brien, this question comes from a Teamster Union member, Terry Richie. Local 25 was involved in a well-publicized incident where you sent members to picket a taping of the TV show "Top Chef."

The picketers broke the law, were indicted, and your own secretary-treasurer was forced to resign after being indicted and convicted. You disavowed these members and told investigators that you would invoke your Fifth Amendment rights before them if you were called as a witness by either the defense or the prosecution.

Did you send the members to this picket line? And why did you feel compelled to plead the Fifth if you did nothing wrong?

Mr. O'Brien: I represent a local union of 11,500 members. We have 220 collective bargaining agreements. My secretary treasurer had full authority to set up informational picket lines and/or community standards picket lines which he did.

I was actually with our General Secretary Treasurer Ken Hall out of town on a matter, but the fact remains that my opponent has used this to attack me, has used to state that we didn't stand by, and we abandoned our members. We signed joint defense agreements as a local union with our criminal attorneys, their criminal attorneys, and also our labor attorneys.

We develop strategy throughout the process. It was unfortunate that our members got indicted. They didn't commit any crimes on that picket line because if they did, the local police would have arrested them, and they didn't.

And we develop jury instructions collectively. And thankfully, our members were acquitted. And we paid the legal fees of three out of the four defendants that were wrongfully accused, and we were able to move forward.

Ms. Matthews: Response.

Mr. Vairma: First of all, I want to remind you that I was at that same meeting that you were at. And when we were in the airport, and you were getting ready to go back and catch a plane, the same as I was getting ready to go back and catch a plane.

You had a really big concern over the fact that you had sent these people down there to go on those picket lines, and you were critically worried that you were going to be arrested that same day that you arrived back at Boston Logan Airport.

I would never send anybody in my Local Union and put them in harm's way knowing that it's going to be an illegal picket line. For sure, I'm going to take responsibility, that if I do that and I put somebody in that position, I'm going to take responsibility for that. I would never throw anybody under the bus for having done something that I asked them to do.

Mr. O'Brien: Steve, no one got thrown under the bus and I don't know where you're making that fictitious story up, but it sounds good. Sounds compelling.

Mr. Vairma: That's not a story.

Mr. O'Brien: But the reality of it is this. Our members were acquitted. No one walked away from our members, and we continue to fight with our members. I just find it odd that six years later he should have stood up back then if he had such a strong opinion of it. And why didn't you do that back then?

Ms. Matthews: All right. Ian.

Mr. Kullgren: I want to turn back to the issue of diversity for a moment. Despite the diverse slates that you both are on...

Ms. Matthews: Please let them know who you're asking the question of. Mr. Vairma.

Mr. Kullgren: Mr. Vairma, this question is for you to start. Despite the diversity of your slate that you've talked about, you and your opponent are both white men running for the president of the nation's fourth-largest union, at a time in the labor movement as a whole is becoming more diverse and less male-dominated.

What is your plan to educate yourself on the economic and social challenges facing Teamsters of color? And how can you assure those members that their voices will be heard?

Mr. Vairma: Yeah, I think that in all fairness, one of the reasons we've created such a diverse slate of candidates on the Teamster Power slate is just that, is to be able to deal with these new issues. Look, for the first time in history, you have a chance to elect a Latino as our number two position in this International Union, as the General Secretary-Treasurer. That's a historic moment.

You take a look at my slate and take a look at the fact that I have five progressive women on that slate. This is a historic moment. If you want to have status quo, you're going to want to go with my opponent in his slate. Because the amount of women that are on that team is the same percentage that we've always had in the General Executive Board.

Under my candidacy, we're promoting women into the labor movement. We are promoting them into positions of leadership. We have done that. And we haven't done that by just sitting there back on our seats and back on our laurels. We've done it as an objective of how we're going to go about organizing members, how we're going to be representing our members in the future.

So it's powerful that we've done these things, it's important that we do these things, and that's how we're going to get educated. It's not just getting educated on it, it's taking action on it, and making sure I have people surrounding me once I am elected, to make sure that we deal with all of these issues, all of these social issues, and deal with that in the public light.

Ms. Matthews: Mr. O'Brien?

Mr. O'Brien: There's no doubt as we stated earlier, whoever wins this election, I believe it's going to be us. We're going to be the most diverse slate in the Teamster's history.

Now, unlike my opponent, I don't criticize his selections, or diversity, or what he deems as a better slate because of more diversity. What I criticize my opponent is in his acceptance speech. And we do have diversity on our slate. We've got African Americans. We've got women. We've got a Latino.

And when he criticizes our candidates on my slate in nine minutes and 57 seconds into his acceptance speech, and he calls them tokens, I think that's real offensive. I think that sets the Teamsters Union back. And I'm not certain what you meant by tokens, but that is unacceptable and I think you owe the members on my slate, especially the diverse members on my slate, an apology.

Ms. Matthews: Time. Rebuttal, Mr. Vairma.

Mr. Vairma: I don't believe that what I meant by tokens is saying anything of disrespect. It's saying that I'm not just going to put people into a position that haven't earned a right to be in those positions. So when I'm creating a team of not just diversity, it has to be people that also bring something to the table as far as leadership roles, that have earned their leadership positions going forward.

All of my candidates have climbed their way to the top, becoming principal executive officers in their unions, becoming advocates, becoming national organizers. These are individuals that have put in their...

Ms. Matthews: Time. Okay, question back to you Mr. Vairma. You do understand that language matters, right?

Mr. Vairma: It does matter, yes.

Ms. Matthews: So, when, from what I'm hearing, you don't think that the word token is discriminatory?

Mr. Vairma: No. I think it could be degrading, and it's a word probably that I should have used, because I just told you what I meant by that word.

Ms. Matthews: Okay. Harold.

Mr. Meyerson: Mr. O'Brien, so far, the experiments with driverless cars haven't gone all that well, but Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos have more dollars than God, and they're going to be investing in this. And that doesn't pose an immediate threat or maybe even a middle-term threat, but it does pose a long-term threat to a lot of your members, to your UPS drivers, and a lot of your other drivers.

What should the Teamsters be doing about this? What kind of plans, contingency plans, and other things might you, might the Union profitably make?

Mr. O'Brien: First, we need to look at all the industries that may be affected by technology, whether it's autonomous vehicles, or drones, or anything else. We need to make sure that we negotiate the strongest conditions to protect our jobs that are covered under those collective bargaining agreements.

We also need to engage our political strength to put out a plight to protect the general public. You know, I know for a fact that I do not want autonomous tractor trailers that are platooning down the highway four and five deep when my family of four may be next to them, and there could be a computer error that could cause a catastrophe.

We need to embrace technology to a certain extent, but we also need to protect our members that currently work in jobs that may be affected from it. But we also need to have a campaign where we invest in fighting against commercial autonomous vehicles, fighting against anything that is going to put the public safety and/or the infrastructure of this company at risk.

You know, all too often, to your point, we say it's not going to happen now, it's not going to happen tomorrow. We have to have a vision and foresight to try and determine what the effects of such technology could have on us. And we need to be on the forefront in negotiating strong contracts and engaging the public in this fight.

Ms. Matthews: Any response, Mr. Vairma?

Mr. Vairma: Yeah. Again, I've made a whole career of taking on these types of battles by building strong coalitions. I take a look at when you're talking about political impact that we have, take a look at what we did in the state of Colorado by building these coalitions, where we actually flipped a red state to a blue state by having these coalitions, working together.

We need to do the same thing when it comes autonomous trucks. There's no place to be putting these autonomous trucks on the road. It's too dangerous. It's reckless. We have too many things that need to be accomplished before we should even consider doing something like that.

And I'm going to oppose anything that's going to take away good Teamster jobs. And that's exactly what this will do. This will eliminate Teamster jobs. And we are going to fight it, and we will do whatever we need to do to protect our members and their rights going forward.

Ms. Matthews: Any rebuttal?

Mr. O'Brien: I think it's inevitable that certain technology is going to have an impact on members' jobs that we currently represent, but I think we also have to look at other opportunities as a result of technology.

When we look at UPS and package delivery being potentially delivered by drones in certain areas, we got to look for opportunity where who is storing these drones? Who are maintaining these drones?

So I think, you know, we have to protect against technology. We have to protect the jobs, but we also have to look for other opportunities as a result of this technology. We got to look to see who's programming these computers.

Ms. Matthews: Time. Final question goes to Ian Kullgren.

Mr. Kullgren: Mr. Vairma, the Teamsters International Union has not gone on strike in about two decades. Should the International be more willing to use strikes as a weapon, and if so, how and when?

Mr. Vairma: I think if you're talking about going on a national strike...

Mr. Kullgren: Correct.

Mr. Vairma: ...that hasn't happened in a long period of time. I think that our goal is not to go out there and put people out on strike. Our goal is to negotiate strong contracts. The ability to take a strike and be prepared for a strike is important. Our ability to flex that muscle when we need to flex that muscle is important.

You know, I've taken on some of the largest corporate giants with Sysco and US Foods. And one of the things that's made us so successful in those campaigns and made us so successful at the bargaining table and take it is that employer knows that at any moment, we can strike those organizations on a national basis.

As far as there being strikes, we have had strikes in my own area during my career. I've had six successful strikes, but we do it smart, we're careful, and it's a last resort. Our job is to bargain those contracts, get our members an agreement, get it in their hands, and let them vote.

Our first choice isn't to try and have a national labor dispute or a national strike action because of what it can do and the harm that it can do to our rank and file members.

Ms. Matthews: Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: Yeah, I think you know, first and foremost, a strike is a last resort. I think first and foremost, bringing your members' demands to the table, trying to achieve those demands and goals is what we should be focused on.

But in the event that an employer doesn't want to listen to us, that wants to not protect and preserve the integrity of the agreement or respect our members' demands, and is not being

reasonable bargaining in good faith, I think strikes are necessary. I've had many strikes, but it's a last resort.

My opponents seem to criticize me because I'm aggressive and we go after employers that don't treat our members right. And that's not going to stop. A threat is a last resort, but it's tremendous leverage to achieving the best goal possible and getting the best contract for our rank and file members.

Ms. Matthews: Any rebuttal?

Mr. Vairma: Yeah. I didn't criticize for being aggressive. I criticized for being reckless.

When I take a look at the Republic strike, for example, when you extended picket lines where you had a 25-member bargaining unit, you extended those picket lines out to everywhere else in the country, cost our members thousands of dollars in lost wages, brought it back around, and ended up walking away from those members.

The critique I have in that is why didn't you strike in your own backyard? You had a Republic Waste in your own area. Why didn't you extend your picket lines in your own backyard first? When I take on a fight and I take on a strike, I bring it to my home first.

Ms. Matthews: Time.

Mr. Vairma: I take...

Ms. Matthews: You've just opened up another can of worms, so I have to give Mr. O'Brien an opportunity to respond.

Mr. O'Brien: So, the Republic strike, we did have a bargaining unit that was up for negotiation in the city of Boston, long-term contract. We struck Republic. We struck them for 100 days with no help from his number two guy, who was in charge of the waste division.

As a matter of fact, his number two guy supports us, who's in charge of the waste division right now. You talk about playing politics with a contract.

When we were fighting with Republic in the street, by the way, every one of those members are working in a Teamster job. I'm proud to say the three areas that we struck, two out of the three are being serviced by union contractors out of health, and welfare, and pension...

Ms. Matthews: Time.

Mr. O'Brien: ...and you didn't help.

[laughter]

Ms. Matthews: Okay. Alright. That completes the question and answer portion of this debate. Each candidate will now have two minutes for closing remarks. And we are going to begin with Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: Yes, I appreciate this opportunity. I appreciate the banter back and forth with my opponent, but the clear choice is evident.

The clear choice is that under the leadership of the O'Brien-Zuckerman/Teamsters United Slate, we will certainly restore the faith of our members back into this great institution.

We will certainly hold employers accountable. We will not shy away from any controversy or any fights. And you know, my opponent wants to go around and say he's never been in trouble, never been an issue, and that's OK.

When you take the path of least resistance and you want to be the General President of the Teamsters Union, it's not going to happen. We are going to make this Union bigger. We're going to make this union faster. We're going to make this union stronger.

We're going to make certain that when we go to the bargaining table with these employers, whether it's an employer with 300,000 members or an employer with 3 members, we are going to make certain that we value the core values and have the best interest of our rank and file members moving forward.

We're going to protect, preserve, and improve working conditions. That's what we took an oath to do, and that's what we're going to do, and that's what we will do under the great slate of the O'Brien-Zuckerman 2021.

Our members have a great opportunity to make history. Our members are unique. But more importantly, we need to encourage our members to vote. We need to encourage our members to get that vote out. My local voted 33 percent last time. Steve's voted 16 percent last time.

We need collectively, I think we can agree that our members voting and engaged in the process is going to determine the right direction moving forward for this Teamsters Union. Thank you.

Ms. Matthews: You've got 30 more seconds. You don't want to use it?

Mr. O'Brien: No, I'm good.

[laughter]

Ms. Matthews: Okay. Mr. Vairma.

Mr. Vairma: Teamsters, you have a very clear choice in this election. My opponent believes in tough talk and chest bumping are answers to complex problems, like emerging from the pandemic, negotiations with global employers, and organizing behemoths like Amazon.

He wants you to believe that he'll lead the strikes to secure your future when his record is abandoning workers, abandoning members on picket lines and in the courtrooms, and then declaring a victory.

He claims he is the healing division when he cuts deals with factions who created financial and political havoc in our union for decades.

Here's what I believe. The true Teamster power comes from our members, plain and simple. You never play politics with people's contracts.

Our union leadership should reflect the men and women who we represent. That's why I've built the most diverse, experienced team of candidates in the Teamsters history to help address the challenges like automation, misclassification, and labor law reform.

This is a team that can lead us in hard bargaining for fair contracts in our fight for social justice. A team that knows how to fight smart, win strikes, and when they're called upon, do the best job in representing our members in their best interest.

A team fought to save the Teamsters Union. This is the best team for you. Do your research, check our records, fact-check everything along the way, but turn out the vote. On October 4th, we can't afford not to vote in this election.

I think we both anticipate a small voter turnout. That would be a shame. We need to energize and make sure that our members do their homework, make sure they do their research, and most importantly, get our members out to vote.

Ms. Matthews: Thank you. Thank you, gentlemen. Well, that concludes the first of the 2021 International Brotherhood of Teamsters presidential debates. Let's give the two candidates a round of applause.

[applause]

Ms. Matthews: Thank you, folks. I want to thank our audience here at the National Press Club for abiding by the rules. And I also want to thank those who have been watching via livestream. I very much want to thank my colleagues on the panel for being here.

And finally, I also would like to thank the club's Headliners team and Richard Mark, the Election Supervisor, for making this lively exercise in union democracy possible. I'd also like to thank Headliners team member Jamie Horwitz, who worked very hard to organize this as well.

The recording of this debate and other information on the Teamsters election can be found at ibtvote.org. That's ibtvote.org.

Now for those members of the Teamsters union in both the United States and Canada, who are watching, look for your ballot in the mail in early October.

And before that, tune in for the next presidential debates originating from Las Vegas on September 14th and Chicago on September 29th. And to all Teamsters members, please be sure to fill out your ballot and return it in the mail so that your vote and your voice can be counted.

Information on the National Press Club and our programs can be found at press.org. That's press.org. Many of those watching this debate may be especially interested in our upcoming Headliners event with the new president of the AFL-CIO who was mentioned tonight, Liz Schuler, at 10:00 AM Eastern on October 13th. Thanks again. Have a good night.

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[applause]