

# Where I'm Coming From



*"I want to get down to the business of learning the finer details of all our industrial divisions and advancing the livelihoods of TWU members across all of our sectors, in all of our workplaces."*



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Growing up in blue collar Brooklyn in the 70's and 80's, we took the subway and buses everywhere. Many families didn't even own a car, and the ones who did weren't ferrying their kids around to play dates, that's for sure.

My Dad, who passed away earlier this year, worked as a truck driver and a lugger in the Meatpacking District on the west side of Manhattan. He left the house at 3:30 in the morning every day. There were times when he came home so exhausted that my Mom would have to help him take his work boots off.

I graduated Nazareth Regional High School in East Flatbush and went off to college on a scholarship. I only lasted a few semesters. Unfortunately, I didn't get the memo that I was supposed to pursue a degree and not... other interests. My parents worked their arses off to give me that opportunity and I let them down terribly. I wouldn't be where I am today without having gone through that period of my life, but I surely regret putting my parents through it.

While I was still a young guy I took the civil service exams for many jobs. NYC Department of Correction called, and after the academy, I was sent to Riker's Island as a Correction Officer. Let me tell you, Confucius didn't have Riker's Island in mind when he uttered his famous proverb, "find a job you love and you'll never work a day in your life." So, in 1993, when New York City Transit offered me a job as a Trackworker, I took the job, joined the TWU and never looked back.

From the very beginning in Transit, I developed deep bonds with my co-workers on the tracks, some of them becoming my best friends in life. The work was demanding because the bosses were tough, and under tremendous pressure from above to "get the job done." Safety rules were frequently ignored in the interest of production, despite the intense danger of working around energized third rails and live train traffic.

I vividly remember one day in the summer of 1994 a boss calling me a "lazy Irish \_\_\_\_" in a dispute over a heavy rubber safety mat used for protection while working near the third rail. The boss lost that battle, and little-by-little my track gang began fighting back in a more organized fashion. I became an active shop steward and began to connect to the broader fights taking place across the subway on safety issues and other management abuses.

I moved up the union's ranks by fighting back, issue by issue, boss by boss. Seventeen years ago, I was elected Chair of the two-thousand member Track Division, and shortly afterward was appointed Acting Vice President of Local 100's Maintenance of Way Department, which stands at over eight-thousand members today.

After several years as a senior elected officer on the union payroll, I was fired in December of 2005 by then Local 100 President Roger Toussaint over a disagreement regarding the sale of 80 West End Avenue, the old headquarters of both the International and Local 100. So, I went back to the subway at 45th St in Brooklyn, to my Track Inspector job. I'll never be able to repay my co-workers for the way they welcomed me back. They encouraged me not to give up on union work, and prodded me to continue advocating for workers.

I worked on the tracks for the next four years. I once again began to look at life through the perspective of a rank and file transit

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worker, and I will now carry that with me forever. Getting fired and going back to the tracks was a total blessing for me in that regard.

I decided to run for office again, and was elected Local 100 President in December 2009 after a bruising campaign. I took office on January 1, 2010.

At that time, the local had been in the midst of a political civil war for the better part of 15 years. I have always believed that infighting drains the power of the union and delivers us into the hands of our enemies. As the new president, I knew that I had to lead by example, so as my first major act in office, I reached out to my opponent in the election, Curtis Tate, and asked him to join my team and help to reunify the union. Fortunately, Curtis agreed. It was a strong and clear signal that the union was indeed moving forward out of a prolonged period of bitterness and internal strife. Yes, he's the same Curtis Tate who is now an elected International Vice President and member of the Transit Division staff, and my good friend.

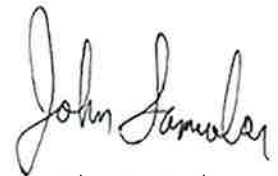
As the Local 100 president, I was suddenly thrust into the position of having to wrangle with the most powerful and influential people in New York as I fought on behalf of our members. Many of those politicians and elites looked down on me, and on my brothers and sisters in Local 100. To them, we were just blue-collar rabble, working class ruffians with creosote beneath our fingernails who could be easily dismissed

or scattered. I'm a Trackworker by trade and proud of it, and I wasn't seeking their validation or approval. But I was damn sure going to defend our union, and I knew that once we were organized and united again they could not defeat us.

Slowly but surely, we rebuilt the local into a unified force capable of winning significant fights for our membership. I'll never forget our contract rally outside New York City Transit's headquarters near Wall Street on the anniversary of Hurricane Sandy. Exactly one year before, Local 100 members had heroically worked around the clock, selflessly and in unity, to restore some sense of normalcy to New York City. More than 8,000 transit workers turned out that day to demand a fair contract. It was a turning point for our negotiations and a turning point for our local. The bosses still had the politicians and courts and a phalanx of lawyers on their side, but we had the power of a unified membership. Which is stronger?

As I take office now as your 10th International President, I don't want to spout lofty ideals or even loftier goals. I want to get down to the business of learning the finer details of all our industrial divisions and advancing the livelihoods of TWU members across all our sectors, in all our workplaces.

I know one thing – **if we stand together as one and fight the bosses**, we can and will win. I'm looking forward to leading that fight.



John Samuelson

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**THE NEXT CHAPTER:**

## The 25th Constitutional Convention and Beyond

