



Transport Workers Union Local 514



Representing American Airlines Maintenance Workers in Tulsa Oklahoma and Greater Southwest Texas.

New TWU International President John Samuelsen is featured in Forbes Magazine, just days after being sworn in. Check it out!

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New Leader of American and Southwest Labor Union Started Out Inspecting New York City Subway Tracks

John Samuelsen, a lifelong Brooklyn resident who once inspected subway tracks and eventually became leader of a historic New York City labor union, has been named international president of the Transport Workers Union, which represents nearly 60,000 workers at American and Southwest Airlines.

Samuelsen, 49, is an articulate, press-savvy, politically involved labor leader who opposes both “the absolute attack against organized labor by the political establishment {as} state after state pass right to work laws designed to undermine labor,” as well as the branch of the Democratic party embodied by New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, whom Samuelsen has characterized as embracing “a hipster, non-working class version of progressivism.”



TWU International President

John Samuelsen

His elevation to president came last week, when incumbent Harry Lombardo, 68, retired unexpectedly. Samuelsen took over ahead of a union election scheduled for September. "Harry felt it was time to enjoy retirement," Samuelsen said. "He did say there was solid young leadership in place."

When Lombardo was elected to a four-year term in September 2013, "the international union was bleeding money," Samuelsen said. "Harry brought fiscal stability. That is absolutely to his credit."

TWU has about 200,000 members, including 140,000 active members. About 42,000 are in Local 100, which Samuelsen headed and which represents New York City bus and subway workers. TWU also represents municipal transportation workers in Philadelphia, Miami, Houston, Columbus and San Francisco.

On the airline side, at Southwest TWU represents about 15,000 flight attendants and 12,000 fleet service and other workers.

At American, TWU and the International Association of Machinists jointly represent about 30,000 workers in a dozen groups including mechanical, fleet service, tower planners and weight and balance planners. Joint representation came after the 2013 merger of American, where TWU had several contracts, with US Airways, where IAM had fleet service, mechanics and related. The two unions generally enjoy a positive relationship.

The American contracts, the largest outstanding contracts for TWU, seem likely to provide the first test of Samuelsen's national leadership.

"I'm a track worker from the New York City subway system and I do not intend to chair negotiations," Samuelsen. "But I will be heavily involved in the strategy."

Last year, American handed out raises averaging 39%, providing industry leading wages while talks continue. In exchange, the unions agreed that either group could work on either legacy airline's aircraft.

"The raise isn't everything," Samuelsen said. "Other issues also have to be dealt with – work rules and blending both contracts into one."

Three influences have defined Samuelsen's life: He is Irish, he has always lived in the Gerritsen Beach neighborhood in Brooklyn and he believes in the labor movement.

His father was a laborer/truck driver in the wholesale meat market and a member of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butchers Workmen union, which later merged into the United Food and Commercial Workers.

"The kids in my neighborhood, their fathers were in the TWU, so I had a great admiration for TWU," Samuelsen said. "When your father belonged to TWU, that was a big thing."

In 1993, He joined TWU after signing on with the New York City Transit Authority as a trackworker. For most of his working career, he was a track inspector, walking subway lines and checking for defects. He was elected Local 100 president in 2009 and was overwhelmingly reelected in 2012 and 2015.

Samuelsen is a strong admirer of Mike Quill, a labor movement hero with an inspiring life story. Quill fought for the Irish Republican Army; immigrated to New York in 1926 and went to work for the IRT, then an independent subway line, as a night gate security man. In 1934, he co-founded the TWU.

Quill regularly demonstrated his courage. He backed the Civil Rights movement from its early days; battled anti-Semitism and the infamous U.S. Senator Joe McCarthy's; led New York's first citywide transit strike in 1966, and died of a heart attack just days after the strike was settled.

When Quill died, Martin Luther King Jr. called him a man "spent his life ripping the chains of bondage off his fellow man."

Samuelsen was born the year after Quinn [sic] died. He becomes the youngest TWU president since Quill took the office in 1937. Like Quill, he believes that "trade unions are the vehicle for economic security and the government has to create an environment where trade unions can flourish."

Samuelsen's downtown Brooklyn office houses Quill's desk as well as some of the early contracts Quill signed.

"Mike Quill was a founder of this union that I love," Samuelsen said. "To sit in the chair Mike Quill sat in is surreal."

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