

What Price Teamster Support?

The budding love affair between the Nixon Administration and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters has some ugly overtones. The ardor with which the President and Secretary of Labor Hodgson have been wooing the two-million-member union, exiled from the rest of the labor movement in 1957 for hoodlum domination, would be questionable enough if it were regarded solely as a bid for political and financial support in next year's Presidential election.

But in the cynical environment that enshrouds this rich union, no amount of official denials can erase suspicion of a deal to free Teamster boss James R. Hoffa, now one-third of the way through a total sentence of 13 years for jury-fixing and pension fraud.

Just three months have gone by since the United States Parole Board rejected a plea to let Hoffa out of jail. Since then, the former Teamster president has resigned from all his union posts, thus clearing the way for the election at the union's convention in Miami Beach yesterday of his hand-picked successor, Frank E. Fitzsimmons, whose only discernible distinction in his union career has been absolute subservience to Mr. Hoffa.

The Teamsters' constitution has just been amended to give the new president virtually unlimited authority to make expenditures for lobbying and political activities. The Taft-Hartley Act prohibits direct union spending in Federal elections, but unions have found a variety of methods for evading these restrictions.

The truck union is not inclined to be parsimonious in throwing its members' money around. It is reportedly planning to give the jailed Hoffa a lump payment of more than \$1 million in lieu of pension, and some sources suggest that the union will pay all the taxes on that sum. The Teamsters' munificence does not end there. Hoffa's son is to be retained as the union's house counsel at \$30,000 a year and his wife will continue as women's director of its political action arm at \$48,000 a year. In fact, now that Mr. Fitzsimmons' own annual salary has been boosted from \$100,000 to \$125,000, Mrs. Hoffa will presumably get a raise.

The convention brought no slightest hint of resolve on the Teamsters' part to clean up the corruption disclosed by the McClellan Committee more than a decade ago. On the contrary, the convention, re-elected a vice president who pleaded guilty to taking illegal payments from employers only a few months ago, and who was spared imprisonment only because his physician told a Federal judge he was too ill to serve. Also re-elected was another vice president awaiting trial on Federal charges of counterfeiting. The thing all the union barons like most about the Fitzsimmons "leadership" is that he leaves them a completely free hand in their domains.

A week before the convention opened, a Federal judge found the union guilty of denying full democratic expression to its members. The convention reluctantly approved constitutional changes, intended to make it easier for the dues payers to initiate reforms, but these steps toward more rank-and-file freedom are to be cancelled if an appeal to higher courts upsets the initial judicial mandate.

All in all, it is a sorry aggregation that the Administration is clutching to its bosom. The least that the country should have is some assurance that the Hoffa request for parole will be handled on its merits, not as a political payoff. If there is "new and substantial information" warranting his release, as the Parole Board intimated in setting a rehearing for Aug. 20, that information ought to be made public. Before going to the penitentiary, the ex-Teamster chief often boasted that every man — and especially every politician — could be bought. That suspicion must not cloud the ultimate decision on his plea for freedom.