



The Highball

Official Publication of
Railroad Workers United

Outpouring of Solidarity Supports and Encourages Railroad Workers

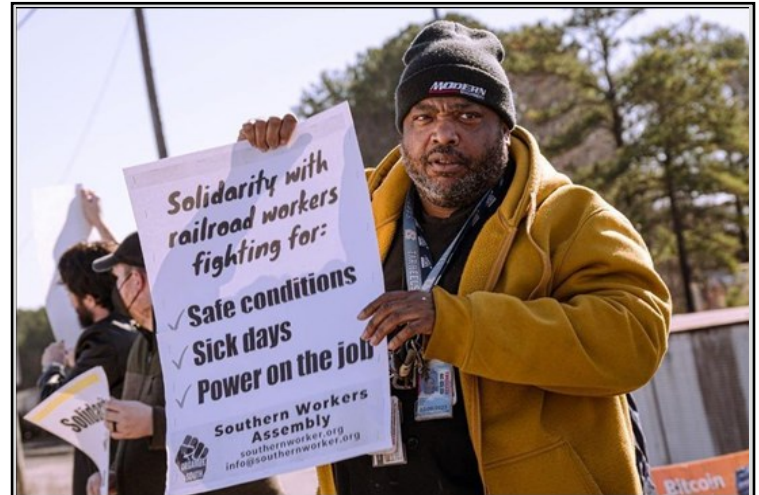
While many rail workers are no doubt letdown and despondent that we did not get to strike and win more of our agenda this Fall, we should all be overjoyed, encouraged, and empowered going forward by the impressive outpouring of solidarity from other workers in the transportation/logistics sector, other workers/unions, the working class in general, and society as a whole.

Once the struggle came under national scrutiny in early September, more and more media outlets became interested and Railroad Workers United answered the call and spoke out. In turn, millions of workers were informed of our fight and the messages of solidarity and support began to come rolling in. Airline pilots, nurses, educators, steel workers, longshore workers, bus drivers, warehouse workers, flight attendants and truckers, to name a few, started emailing and calling RWU with messages of solidarity and support. Then, the donations started rolling in, along with request for information as to how folks could donate to a strike fund, and where and when picket lines would be set up.

After the Biden-Walsh intervention and the tentative agreement (TA) was reached with the officialdom of the BRS, BLET and SMART-TD – and once RWU announced a Vote NO Campaign against the TA, workers outside of the rail industry began to understand that railroad workers were for real and that we were ready to fight. Support and solidarity began to escalate. On Nov. 1, RWU conducted a mass meeting that had the backing and support of dozens of unions and organizations including Democratic Socialist of America (DSA), Steelworkers #675; Transit Workers #1005; Labor Network for Sustainability; Solutionary Rail; Truckers Movement for Justice; Letter Carriers #825; Southern Workers Assembly; and many more. In addition, some of these organizations – without being asked – donated funds, while many participants bought “tickets” (donations) when registering for the event. Thousands of viewers watched both live and over the coming days. But the best was yet to come.

As the December 9th strike deadline loomed, the Signalmen voted down their TA by 60%, followed by the Boilermakers and then SMART-TD. The stage was set for a strike. Messages of support, advice and encouragement, along with donations, new “Solidarity Memberships,” and offers of picket line support came pouring in. A brother from the electrician’s union suggested we do a Go Fund Me Campaign. We launched it December 2nd and by the end of the month we had achieved our goal of \$25,000 with nearly 500 individual donors, together with solidarity statements from union members of AFSCME, UFCW, CWA, UAW, IBEW, IWW, SBU and many more.

Throughout the fall, rallies and demonstrations began to pop-up here and there, called by rank & file groupings of railroad workers, ad hoc labor solidarity groups, and finally on December 13th (better late than never) an actual rail union - SMART-TD. In all of these events, RWU worked to build attendance and militancy,



Rail workers and allies with the Southern Workers Assembly rally in Durham, NC in a show of support for the railroad workers struggle.

and in a number of cases assisted in the organization of the event. RWU members came together in Boston with DSA and the Boston Labor Solidarity Committee to pull off a rally of a few hundred to protest Biden’s visit to Boston a few days after his strike-breaking effort. A mass rally and march took place at Grand Central Station in New York the following week with hundreds of workers from various unions across the city. Smaller assemblies were slapped together by union activists and RWU members at a handful of other locations.

Rail workers’ actions of resistance have inspired millions of workers across the country, many of whom stood at the ready to support us morally, financially, and physically. RWU was able to build a sizable network of individuals and organizations, ready for the next uprising of rails whenever and wherever that may occur. Whether the issue is crew staffing minimums, draconian attendance policies, the next round of national handling, or a specific on-property contract fight, we have emerged from this round of struggle with a committed assortment of allies who have learned of our struggle and have proven themselves ready to come to our aid and support in the future.

And just as they were there for us, we will be there for them. Longshore workers are engaged in a big fight on the west coast. A quarter million UPS drivers are poised to strike next summer. Port drayage drivers are organizing, as are warehouse workers. RWU and railroad workers need to do what we can to build upon this cross-sectoral solidarity with other workers in struggle, but especially the fights of those above-mentioned workers along the supply chain that are next to take the national stage. An injury to one is an injury to all! Solidarity forever!



Railroad Workers – and Railroad Workers United – Come Roaring Back

In the last 4 years or so, the one-two punch of 1) PSR, followed by 2) the pandemic, combined to decimate the workforce, slashing employment levels by up to 30%, furloughing thousands and destroying years of seniority for countless others. Throw in the advent of untenable draconian attendance policies of the past few years and combined, this triple whammy is responsible for crippling morale, creating an atmosphere of pessimism and despair, causing thousand to leave the industry. RWU of course suffered along with the workforce. We lost numerous members from the ranks as well as from our Steering Committee, and for the first time, found it necessary to reduce our leadership body from 11 to just 9. New membership was at an all-time low. Participation fell off as workers anticipated an uncertain future, all the while working more hours and having less time for activism.

But it seems we have turned the corner. Railroad workers are fighting back. While this latest bargaining round was cut short by the government, preventing workers from winning a better contract, what we were able to achieve was important, especially when looking forward to the next bargaining round. The rail carriers have been discredited and are on the defensive. While we may not have “won” the battle in this round of bargaining, we changed the balance of forces, gained some much needed collective confidence, got our side of the story across to the American people, witnessed the building of a mass solidarity effort by the working class on our behalf, and emerged in a stronger position for the next round going forward.

Likewise, RWU has rebounded. Never have we seen new memberships as great as they have been this last year, rivalled only by the numbers during the 2014 RWU-led fight against single person train operations on BNSF. And we have never achieved anything like the media coverage we enjoyed since this past summer. News outlets large and small came knocking on our door, and since the union leadership was not especially interested in talking, working railroaders of RWU stepped up and filled

the void. We emerged with a database of hundreds of media contacts to call on when the shit hits the fan next time, and a Media Outreach Committee of over a dozen working and retired railroaders who have honed their skills and likewise, stand at the ready for the next round.

From a solidarity perspective, RWU and railroad workers are now on the map. Rail unions typically do not take part in the larger labor movement, and as our numbers have shrunk dramatically in recent decades, so has our influence upon the greater labor movement and the working class. RWU has assisted in reversing that trend over the course of this past year, as millions of workers have been exposed to our issues and our struggle, and have pledged their solidarity and support (See Article Page 1).

From a financial perspective, we are in a better position than ever. Between the success of our Go Fund Me Campaign in December (see article Page 1), hundreds of other voluntary donations, dozens of new Sustainers, dues from countless new memberships, and close to a thousand online merchandise sales, RWU is better off financially than ever before. The organization is poised to take on additional staff support, and hopes to take on a part time grant writer to assist us in raising funds to build various campaigns including our efforts to build solidarity along the supply chains and to bring the railroads under public control.

Railroad workers are on the move. And so is RWU. We encourage every one of you working railroaders from all the crafts and from all unions and carriers – freight and passenger – now is the time to join Railroad Workers United! Simply visit our website at www.railroadworkersunited.org and find the link on the Home Page to join.

See Page 8 to learn more about the benefits you get when you become a part of RWU.



Railroad Workers United

Railroad Workers United was organized in April 2008 at a Founding Convention in Dearborn, MI. RWU grew out of decades of struggle within the craft unions for unity, solidarity, and democracy. We are carrying on a tradition of rank & file activity which dates back to the 1890s and the time of Eugene V. Debs.

RWU is a cross-craft inter-union caucus of rail labor activists across North America. All rail workers of all crafts from all carriers who support our Statement of Principles are welcome to join in our efforts. Please write, call, or email. See the contact information below.

Statement of Principles

- Unity of All Rail Crafts**
- An End to Inter-Union Conflict**
- Rank-and-File Democracy**
- Membership Participation & Action**
- Solidarity Among All Railroaders**
- No to Concessionary Bargaining**

International Steering Committee

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Chuck Abbate | SMART-TD #898b, KEOLIS, Boston, MA |
| Gabe Christenson | SMART-TD #1043, UP, Sparks, NV |
| Bill Connell | SMART-TD #1473, CSX, Framingham, MA |
| Jason Doering | SMART-TD #1117, UP, Las Vegas, NV |
| Ross Grooters | BLET #778, UP, Des Moines, IA |
| Ron Kaminkow | BLET #51, AMTK, Reno, NV |
| Paul Lindsey | BLET #228, UP, Pocatello, ID |
| Frank Parell | BMWED #2906, NJT, Red Bank, NJ |
| Hugh Sawyer | BLET #316, NS, Atlanta, GA |
| Matt Weaver | BMWED #2624, CSX, Toledo, OH |
| Andrew Weir | TCRC-LE #240, CN, Sarnia, ON |

Alternates

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Eric Basir | ATU #208, CTA, Chicago, IL |
| Matthew Grouix | SMART-TD #432, CN, Champaign, IL |
| J.P. Johnson | SMART-TD #117, Amtrak, Milwaukee, WI |
| Ian Kaminski | SMART-TD #898, Keolis, Boston, MA |
| Tim Miller | NCFO #1218, NS, Conway, PA |

Trustees

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| Ed Michael | BLET #724/SMART-TD #979, UP – Retired, Salem, IL |
| Jeff Kurtz | BLET #391, BNSF – Retired, Fort Madison, IA |

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RWU P.O. Box 2131 Reno, NV 89505



Rail Labor

Thinking of Running for Union Office? RWU Promotes Some Principled and Effective Positions

The defeat of what may have been the most entrenched and powerful President of a rail union – Dennis Pierce of the BLET – by a working railroader - Edward Hall - one who had never held office above the local union level and had no prior experience in the union bureaucracy - is evidence of the deep level of discontent within the ranks of rail labor. Hall announced his candidacy this past summer, and ran a very limited campaign. Despite lack of name recognition, he won. (For more analysis on this stunning development, see the article on Page 4).

5 – Advocating some form of provision to work the craft regularly while in office in order to keep in touch with the changing nature of the job and current working conditions of employment and working railroaders.

6 – Restricting wages of union officers so they do not exceed the highest annual wage achieved when working in the craft. In addition, no more multiple salaries for union officials. We want union leaders who want to lead, not use the union as a way to self aggrandizement.

7 - Modifying union officers' wage & benefit increases so they are tied to what the members receive through contractual agreements. Leaders need to see themselves, first and foremost, as working rail workers, whose material conditions are predicated upon what the union wins, like every other union member.

8 - Creating an open bargaining process where the contract bargaining is brought into the light of day from behind closed doors, where members' input is essential and they are informed at every step of the process. Bargaining offers us an opportunity to involve the members, to invite them to be part of the process, and to build support and empower the bargaining committee.

9 - Involving the membership in the bargaining process by organizing and preparing the ranks *before* the actual bargaining with the carriers even commences.

10 - Forcefully articulating the union's program and our perspective to the media and the American people. RWU just provided a perfect example of what the unions can do to promote our goals, objectives and our perspective, and win support from other workers, unions, the working class, and society in general.

11 - Working in solidarity with other unions, workers' groups, environmental organizations, citizens' groups, rail advocacy groups and others in order to overcome our isolation and build power beyond our limited numbers.

12 - Conducting national union conventions in conveniently located major rail hub cities such as Chicago, Kansas City and St Louis, as opposed to cities like Las Vegas and Miami. In doing this, Delegates would be less likely to see their attendance as a junket or vacation. In addition, rank & file rail workers in these large rail hubs would be able to attend as guests and learn about how their union works and who the players are.

RWU is confident that these positions resonate with working railroad workers. For those wishing to adopt these positions – and for those who work to implement them upon obtaining union office – we fully expect that you will be victorious in your bid for election, and win the support and backing of the membership to move the union forward. (see Page 7 for more thoughts.)

What does a revitalized, rejuvenated rail labor movement and leadership need to look like?

Hall's victory will no doubt inspire other working railroaders to likewise consider running for office. This is great news for union democracy, membership participation and motivation, new ideas and new directions, all of which are sorely needed in rail labor across all crafts and all unions. But all of this begs a series of questions: What will new leadership bring? What changes must new leadership make in order to move us forward? How can we assure that the "new boss" is not simply the same as the "old boss"? In essence: What does a revitalized, rejuvenated rail labor movement and leadership need to look like?

RWU believes that any union leader must be guided by a principled approach including a commitment to Solidarity, Unity and Democracy. Without such a commitment, we will endlessly swap current, unimaginative, cautious, uncreative and complacent union leaders for a new set every so many years. While we desperately need new leadership in the rail unions, we need leadership that is committed to changing the structure, the perspective and the culture that mitigates towards creating such lousy, do-nothing, go along-get along "leadership." Without these commitments, even the most sincere, noblest aspiring leaders, will inevitably be limited to delivering more of the same.

To these ends, RWU suggests a series of institutional/attitudinal changes that any insurgent candidate wishing to move the union forward must commit to. RWU urges candidate for union office to include the following in their platforms and make a public commitment to the following dozen positions:

1 - Supporting a single bargaining coalition of all rail unions, a true coalition, one which is based upon rock solid ironclad solidarity, a coalition predicated upon the idea that no union settles until all settle.

2 – Exploring the possibilities of merging with other unions with the ultimate goal of achieving a single union of all rail workers.

3 – Supporting one-member-one-vote for all union offices at the local, GCA, and national division levels.

4 – Advocating some form of term limits where leadership serves a term or two, rotates back into the craft for a term, and is then eligible to run again. This will keep our union leaders honest and in touch with the membership. They will be more concerned with the contracts they negotiate, and the conditions of employment, if they know they will soon be returning to labor under their terms and conditions for a term (or longer).



Machinist Reece Murtagh (left) plans to run for the top office along with a full slate for the leadership of the IAM District #19 (railroad workers) this year. Like Edward Hall who just won the Presidency in the larger BLET, RWU believes that these challengers upon assuming office must advance the agenda as outlined on this page if they are to be successful.



Rail Labor

The BLET Leadership Election and its Lessons for Rail Workers

On December 19th, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen (BLET) formally announced that it had elected a new President, Edward Hall of Tucson, Arizona, a working railroader of 27 years. The unexpected outcome has sent shock waves through the ranks of the officialdom of the twelve rail unions. How did an obscure engineer who has never held a paid position – either staff or elected – who has served as a humble vice local chairman for many years while playing no role in either the GCA or the national division, come to defeat the most entrenched rail union president? And what are the implications of this election for the BLET and all rail unions going forward?

How Did This Happen?

For those engineers and other rails who were thoroughly disenfranchised and disgusted by the PEB, the TA, and the union officials handling of bargaining this round, Pierce's defeat is poetic justice. While working railroaders in the main were not happy with the Tentative Agreement, many found themselves either abstaining or voting YES simply because it was made clear to them that it was fruitless to resist. The union officials had not done the necessary work of organizing and galvanizing the members for a strike. They had failed to stick together when the PEB was announced, the so-called coalition splintering into nothing within days of the PEB being announced. They then went all-out to sell the membership on the TA, not just extolling its virtues but using the threats that a NO vote would only mean it would have to be repackaged and re-sold to the members once again (as the IAM members would learn after they voted NO), along with the threat that the government would no doubt not tolerate a strike and would order us back to work – on potentially worse terms than the TA. Add to all this the fact that both political parties, all three branches of government, the Labor Department, the Transportation Department, some of the most powerful corporations in the US AND their own union leadership were all allied against them, and enough rail workers simply threw in the towel. You know when you are beat.

But there just happened to be – by some divine providence – a second ballot that was taken concurrently and coincidentally with the TA ballot, at least in the BLET. More than a dozen years ago, rank and file workers campaigned and won through initiative, the right to directly elect their top officers in the BLET. (NOTE: RWU had worked tirelessly to promote, and then protect when it was threatened four years later – this sacred democratic right). While the power of this democratic feature has hardly been recognized nor utilized by the membership in more than a decade, now here was the chance to cast a ballot that could not be thwarted by the carriers, the government, nor the union officials. The chance to vent that pent up frustration and anger of being dismissed by the powers-that-be. They had the chance to vote for one of their own; i.e., a working railroader who had served ample time in the trenches, one highly critical of the TA, as opposed to an entrenched “pork chopper” who had not touched a throttle in a generation, one who presided over the construction of the unpopular TA. They jumped at it.

What Does This Mean for Rail Labor?

The implications for the rest of rail labor remain to be seen. But the cat is out of the bag, as many young working railroaders are observing. The mass discontent with the splintered and divided craft union system is growing. The anger towards ineffective and do-nothing union “leaders” is building. With the defeat of the BLET president, no union official's job is safe. We can expect in

the coming months to see various insurgents challenge the incumbents and vie for leadership in the various craft unions.

In the case of Edward Hall, he chose to run a simple campaign with no slate and no platform to speak of other than dislike of the TA. In the heat of the unpopular contract fight, he was able to succeed. Future efforts in other rail unions may need a little more juice to get across the finish line, especially now that union officials know they are vulnerable and may organize a more effective defense to hold onto their positions. In addition, keep in mind that most rail unions do not allow for one-member-one-vote for top officers, so the insurgents will have to wade through the quagmire of a convention and woo the delegates assembled – often who are intimidated by, beholden to, and under the thumb of the incumbent machine – in order to get elected. Still, these are obstacles that are not insurmountable.

What Union is Next Up?

It just so happens that the other rail union that has a one-member-one-vote system for top officers is the Machinist union (IAM) District #19. While smaller than the big three by far (BLET, SMART-TD, BMWED), this union has traditionally been the largest of the shop crafts. And it just so happens that the membership of the IAM was the first to vote down the TA, after it had been the first where union officials had voted to accept the PEB at face value. Through coaxing and cajoling, blackmailing and bow beating, the IAM officials “convinced” the membership to approve the repackaged TA that had been rejected, earning the ire and resentment of many a rank and filer. In this atmosphere, a number of disgruntled members came together and by December had put together a full slate of candidates to challenge the incumbents. They hope to get nominated in February and if successful in achieving ballot status, run and win the election in June. For more information, please see the website: <https://dl19united.com> or contact candidate for District 19 President, Reece Murtagh at: reecemurtagh@gmail.com.

A powerful and vibrant labor movement is synonymous with a democratic labor movement.

Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win!

RWU encourages all railroad workers who are members in good standing of their respective craft union and who meet the requirements to be nominated, to consider running for office. While you must run your own campaign, put a slate together, decide on what issues to run on, and raise your own funds and manage your campaign, RWU has a wealth of experience and is willing to share ideas, and otherwise assist in hooking you up to mount a successful run for office. You may also wish to consult with the Association for Union Democracy who has been advising and assisting insurgent campaigns for well over half a century.

We need a “multi-party” system in our unions, where competing ideas and strategies are put before the members for their consideration. The more members who jump into the fray and vie for power, the better. A powerful and vibrant labor movement is synonymous with a democratic labor movement. It is time for everyone to get involved in the process!



Commentary

Seize the Moment – Time to Go on the Offensive!

Well, these last several months have been quite a ride. There's been so much swirling around in my tortured brain I'm not quite sure where to begin. Fortunately, a lot of that is already covered in this issue of *The Highball*. Throughout this issue you'll find thought provoking, educational and insightful analysis on the many contributing factors that have brought us to this point - from being divided into 12 different unions - and thus effortlessly conquered - to the caliber of leadership of our unions, as well as the political landscape - to pointing the way forward.

To this discussion, I'll add a factor that I've raged about over the years in the shanties, on the engine and in this column: *That the leadership of the railroad unions, as they are currently constituted, accept the terms of engagement demanded by the enemy.*

Nobody in their right mind would take the ice for a hockey game if the opponent dictated that you could only have 3 skaters and no goalie. You wouldn't take the field for a football game if your team could only have 5 players and weren't allowed to wear protective padding. You wouldn't go into a wrestling match straight-jacketed, handcuffed and blindfolded. But per the Railway Labor Act (RLA) the above scenarios are similar to the disproportionately, lopsided terms of engagement railroad workers are forced to accept every day when they set foot on the property. *"Do as you're told - file your grievance later! Resistance is futile!"*

As long as the rail union leaders continue to accept, what I consider to be, the immoral, unethical, corrupt and outright crooked essence of the RLA then yes, resistance will be futile.

OK so the engineers just booted out Pierce. That's a good start - right? Hopefully it could be. Time will tell. Speaking of Pierce, I'm going to respond to a few tidbits in his concession statement.

Now while I readily concede that there is plenty of over-the-top, ugly and ultimately counter-productive negativity on social media, there has to be a place for legit criticism - even from an "outsider" like myself. Pierce can't sing the praises of craft & union autonomy, then dismiss the opinions of others who end up impacted by precedents set by another union - like his.

I've told the story previously of how Pierce, in 2015, sold Hunter Harrison's puke-wretched agreement to his membership at CP, even after SMART-TD had twice rejected it decisively. Once the BLET ratified it, the arbitrator was able to ram it down SMART-TD's throat against their will. This was nothing less than vile, anti-union, back-stabbing treachery. Members have now sent him off into early retirement over the new contract, but some apparently had no issue with conduct like this or worse; e.g. inviting the Class One CEOs - the sworn enemy of rail workers - to join BLET officials at the union's 150th anniversary party in 2013.

SMART-TD's leadership gets no pass here. They *should* have called out the BLET over the incident I just described, but to do so would've meant indicting the very system they've defended.

In his concession statement, Pierce admonished his membership to "...stop blaming their union and its officers for the actions of those carriers...Place the blame for the oppressive workplace where it belongs, on the rail carriers, not your union."

Fair enough. Nobody supports a united stand of ALL rails against the carriers more than I do. But when our unions are pathetically negligent in honoring their publicly stated mission to fight for and defend the interests of the workers, they are an obstacle at best - they aid and abet the enemy at worst. Eugene V. Debs ex-

plained this clearly in his 1905 essay, "You Railroad Men." It's on our website and is essential reading for all disgruntled rails.

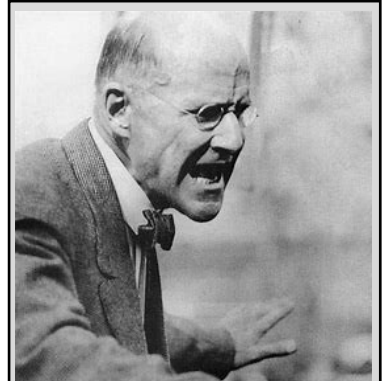
The truth may hurt, but it needs to be told. Railroad workers have long had legit beefs against their union leaders, but there's something to be said for looking in the mirror and taking responsibility. As long as too many rails continue to willingly, voluntarily accept this caliber of leadership, with its built-in divide & conquer infrastructure, then resistance will continue to be futile.

When a new hire, hanging on literally for dear life to the side of a boxcar with one hand, as he/she tries to control the slack action with the knob on his/her remote-control pack, so that he/she doesn't get thrown off, then hears stories about the "good ol' days" - when the engineer (or fireman/asst. engineer) took instructions from the conductor, hind brakeman and/or head brakeman - one might ask, "How did this happen? How was it allowed to get like this?"

On Dec. 13, 2022, a Brother was killed as he was struck by protruding metal from an oncoming train on the adjacent track. Could that have been prevented if the train were smaller and inspected around curves, by a head-end and a caboose crew, that were able to catch that in time? Since I don't know all the details - how long the train was, how deep the offending car was, etc. - I can't really say. But I can say that the roadside hot box detectors, the technology that, along with rear end devices, were used to justify eliminating the caboose and those crew members, obviously didn't detect it. Sorry, I had to vent.

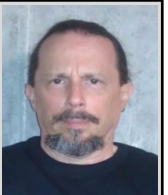
Rails should justifiably complain about the carriers' ruthlessness, their union leaders' impotence and so-called "friends-of-labor" politicians' deceitful double-talk and treacherous actions. But until railroad workers in mass begin to seriously organize resistance to all-of-the-above, then it's just urinating in the wind.

Not only does RWU strive to be crystal clear about the challenges we face, we are also striving to chart a course to overcome those challenges. Until someone comes up with a superior organization, RWU is the mothership for likeminded thinkers & fighters to come together, interact, exchange thoughts, views and opinions on how to move this forward - then decisively act upon what's been democratically decided. Every disgruntled rail needs to join RWU and become part of an educated, inspired, organized, mobilized rank & file movement to take back *our* unions - whatever form that takes - in order to utilize them to effectively fight for safety & dignity, on & off the job.



Eugene V. Debs devoted most of his adult life to speaking and writing his truth, striving to educate, inspire and challenge the working class to understand the economic and political structures in order to effectively fight for social justice.

Mark Burrows has served as Organizer and Co-Chair for RWU. He retired at the end of 2015, after hiring out in 1974, working as an engineer for a combined total of 37 years for the C&NW and the Soo Line/CP Rail in Chicago, Illinois. He was SMART-TD 1433's Delegate for the 2011 & 2014 International Conventions and continues to be an active member of RWU.





Editorial

Rail Labor's Failure of Leadership and the Path Forward

Railroad labor today finds itself at a significant juncture. Unions representing roughly half of the railroad workers who are party to the national agreement have approved contracts, while unions representing the other half have rejected them. And within each of the 12 crafts unions, roughly half of the workers have voted to accept the agreement while roughly half have voted to reject it. Perhaps this phenomenon is a microcosm of the larger society, where we see elections decided with razor thin margins of separation between each of the two major political parties. Yet if you were to ask the average railroader, just like the average citizen about their level of contentment with their situation, their government leaders, and/or their union officials, their response would no doubt be overwhelmingly negative.

This round of bargaining was supposed to change things for railroad workers. After decades of declining working conditions, recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the number of railroad workers who are "pulling the pin" and leaving Class One freight service for greener pastures, whether that be short lines and regional railroads, Amtrak and commuter service, or departing the rail industry all together. The fact that we have never witnessed such a phenomenon is evidence of the fact that there is mass discontent amongst the workforce. As this round of bargaining evolved, it become apparent to many railroad workers that this was our best opportunity in decades to make change and win a few concessions from the rail carriers to improve our quality of life on the job.

With Democrats in control of all three branches of government, and a rail friendly/labor friendly President in the White House, politically things were supposedly more favorable than in the past. In addition, the rail unions had formed one of the largest bargaining coalitions in memory, and by the time of the PEB, all 12 had morphed into a single coalition. Our union leadership made a point of telling us that this was all good. Add to this the fact that the carriers were shorthanded, were having trouble recruiting and retaining employees, and were holding trains by the hundred for rested crews. On top of all this, the supply chains had been battered and bruised in recent months, with shippers up in arms about lousy service and delayed shipments. The Class One carriers were given a black eye, their antics on display for the whole country to see. Their operating model - Precision Scheduled Railroading - was being roundly criticized as a farce and a detriment to not just rail workers, but to the nation's health and economy. All of this seemed to mitigate in favor of rail labor. We had the carriers on the ropes.

Despite these promising conditions, the victory that we had hoped for and expected did not materialize. Instead, we have been corralled, coaxed, cajoled, bribed, blackmailed and threatened by the Railway Labor Act, Democrats and Republicans, the Secretary of Labor, the Class One rail carriers, along with our union officials, to accept a contract that most of us felt should have been, could have been, and needed to be, far better.

Throughout the debacle of the last few months, we have witnessed an extreme lack of leadership from our union officials. But one might ask, how can we expect leadership when we have been forever divided by craft and union into twelve disparate organizations? Further, how can we expect creative, dynamic, and principled leadership when our antiquated and archaic unions are largely one-party fiefdoms? Where the union officials become entrenched and rarely if ever go back in the craft and labor under the contracts which they negotiate? Where direct



Despite the rail union officials' failure to call on the labor movement to come to our assistance, workers took to the streets in a number of communities to show support. Here, workers from a myriad of occupations and unions gather at Grand Central Terminal for a solidarity rally in New York City in December, 2022.

elections at the middle and upper levels are practically non-existent? Where the average age of the average union official is years if not decades older than the average working railroader? Where the perks and privileges of being a union official are many. And where most are close to retirement age and expect to retire from work as a union official? (See more on Page 4).

If we want principled, courageous, and dedicated leadership in our unions, then replacing this crippling craft union ball-and-chain is a good place to start.

We have enabled and tolerated an undemocratic system where the average union leader adopts a go-along-get-along attitude with the labor bureaucracy and thereby is able to "rise from the ranks" to a full-time position on the executive board and perhaps even to the presidency of the organization. And since the Republican Party has proven its outright hostility to the working class while pledges its support for big business, the same go-along-get-along union leadership pays homage to the Democratic party as their only hope and the only political game in town. This is why House Speaker Nancy Pelosi can announce boldly a few days before the September 15th strike deadline that a strike will not be tolerated and the insolent workers will be ordered back to work, while just a few weeks later be invited to a rail union convention where she extolls the virtues of rail labor, its exploits and sacrifices, and condemns the harsh working conditions foisted upon us by the big rail carriers.

So fellow rail workers, purging our unions of this ossified, conservative, cautious, concessionary outlook is no easy task. Simply replacing one union president with a new face - as promising is such a development would be - is not a panacea nor will it solve the ills of rail labor and the labor movement as a whole. To

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Editorial

Rail Labor's Failure of Leadership and the Path Forward

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better understand what needs to be done, we may want to look back 130 years to the formation of the American Railway Union (ARU) in the 1890s. By that time the craft union system had already become entrenched on the railroads, and it was becoming increasingly apparent that this arrangement was not working to the benefit of the railroad worker. A locomotive fireman by the name of Eugene V Debs, along with other dissident craft union leaders and members formed the first "industrial union" in the United States, one in which all workers in the same industry – rather than craft – were organized *together*. It was incredibly popular and within less than a year, its national membership had eclipsed the combined memberships of all of the craft union "brotherhoods." The ARU was capable of mounting a hugely successful strike against the Great Northern Railroad. The organization was predicated upon internal union democracy, limited perks and benefits for union officials, a commitment to organizing railroad workers of all crafts, and universal solidarity of all railroad workers.

If we want principled, courageous, and dedicated leadership in our unions, then replacing this crippling craft union ball-and-chain is a good place to start. The current rail union structure, rooted as it is in craft division, is a recipe for parochialism and backwardness, and plays right into the carriers' game of divide-and-conquer. You need look no further than this chaotic and convoluted round of bargaining for evidence of this. The unions' fetishized "craft autonomy", the crack-up of the so-called "bargaining collation" within days of the PEB, the sell-out "me too" clauses of unions that settled first, and the general inability to act in solidarity as one are all manifestations of this archaic system. Can you imagine a modern union – let's take the Teachers as an example – intentionally dividing itself into 12 different unions - one for grammar school teachers, one for high school teachers, one for music and art, one for gym, special ed and so forth? The notion of course, while absurd, is no less absurd than what we have today on the railroad in the 21st century.

But while transcending this outmoded model – inherited as it is from the 19th century – is paramount if we hope to achieve the power in bargaining that we need to win, rail workers must also build an organization that is steeped in internal democracy at all levels. We need workers from all age groups and seniority feeling empowered to run for office, and bring an end to this notion of "professional" leadership who take up space on executive boards for decades. We need direct elections for officers at the general committee and national levels. If it is good enough for local union elections, it should be mandatory at the higher levels of administration as well. We need to end the bloated and multiple salaries of top union officers and make provisions that all union officers rotate back into the craft every so often, and thereby maintain contact with the membership, their familiarity with the job, and better understand and appreciate the conditions of employment that are negotiated on their watch.

And we can no longer pledge our support to politicians and political parties that are pawns of the rich and corporations, including the big rail carriers. We must refrain from endorsing or funding candidates for public office who cannot commit to our basic agenda.

Finally, and importantly, the process of union contract negotiations conducted behind closed doors must end and be brought

into the light of day. The membership must be involved in bargaining at every step and be organized to back up the bargaining committee with creative actions throughout the course of the bargaining round.

If we get started on these tasks TODAY, we might just be in a position by the start of the next round of national handling to actually win something. The struggle is a righteous one, and one that is supported by thousands of rail workers. But it will not be easy. Obviously, the rail carriers do not want to face a united and militant union. Neither political party wants to see a powerful and class-conscious railroad workforce. Even our own union "leadership" can be counted on to oppose these ideas.

In the words of Eugene V. Debs more than one hundred years ago: *"Why should the railroad employees be parceled out among a score of different organizations? They are all employed in the same service. Their interests are mutual. They ought to be able to act together as one. But they divide according to craft and calling, and if you were to propose today to unite them that they might actually do something to advance their collective and individual interests as workers, you would be opposed by every grand officer of these organizations."*

But do not waste your time hating, despising, or vilifying your union officials. In many cases they are in fact doing the best they can with a union, legal, and political structure that handicaps them at every turn. And remember that a new face – one without a platform and an organization (caucus) rooted in the rank & file and pledged to cross-craft solidarity, industrial unionism, and internal democracy at all levels – will simply end up saddled by the same inefficient and backward structure that is at the root of our troubles. It is up to ALL of us railroaders to make the changes we so desperately need. Once again, in the words of Debs, *"I am not a Labor Leader; I do not want you to follow me or anyone else; if you are looking for a Moses to lead you out of this capitalist wilderness, you will stay right where you are. I would not lead you into the promised land if I could, because if I led you in, someone else would lead you out. You must use your heads as well as your hands, and get yourself out of your present condition; as it is now the capitalists use your heads and your hands."*





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"The craft union seeks to establish its own petty supremacy. Craft division is fatal to class unity. To organize along craft lines means to divide the working class and make it prey to the capitalist class."

Eugene V Debs, Founder of the American Railway Union

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- Discounts up to 25% on most RWU merchandise.
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- Meeting Minutes from each Steering Committee meeting.
- The right to attend the RWU Biennial Convention.
- Most importantly, you will become part of a network of like-minded railroaders who are working to make a difference. For advice, encouragement, ideas, and support to assist you in your day-to-day struggles on the railroad, there is no finer network today to be a part of than Railroad Workers United!



Railroad conductors and engineers rallied together with workers from a dozen other unions on December 13th in Sparks, Nevada, a terminal on Union Pacific. Railroad Workers United assisted in building a number of rallies around the country last year that were called by various groupings at various times throughout the contract struggle. Going forward, RWU hopes that all unions, crafts, and groups can coordinate nationwide solidarity actions that will amplify our collective strength and impact.