

To Win the Fight for Two Person Crews, Rail Workers Need a “Plan B”

On November 1, 2004, the rail carriers umbrella group – the National Carriers Conference Committee – submitted “Section 6 notices” under the Railway Labor Act to both unions of the operating crafts. Both were identical. And both demanded a reduction in crew size from the current standard of two employees to just one. As this issue of *The Highball* goes to press on April 1, 2021, nearly 16 years later, no Class One mainline trains are being operated in such a fashion.

Despite the carriers’ efforts and despite the unions’ half-hearted efforts at best, and their treacherous betrayals at worst, trains across the United States continue to roll with both a certified locomotive engineer and a certified conductor on board. This, of course, has only been realizable due to the determination of the rank and file of both crafts, united in opposition to their plan.

For those not around at the time and for those who fail to remember, the workers’ proudest moment of resistance came in the summer of 2014. A tentative agreement that would have mandated single person crews on most mainline trains – sprung on the unsuspecting trainmen on the BNSF former BN lines – was vehemently protested and overwhelmingly rejected. With aid and assistance provided by Railroad Workers United, the BN workers, other rails, and community allies sprung into action and mounted a “Vote NO!” campaign, the likes of which surprised not just the BNSF, but the rail unions as well. Every terminal and every craft systemwide rejected the contract. When the votes were counted, an unprecedented turnout revealed that the workers had voted down the single crew concept by a 5-to-1 margin!

While this was a great victory, an impressive show of strength, solidarity and determination by the workforce, the rail carriers have since double-downed on their commitment to prevail. Now they openly boast of their intentions, and boldly state their intentions to ram this concept down our throats. In such a hostile environment, we cannot put our faith in the courts, in the arbitration process, nor in politicians at the state and national levels. While it is true that we have won tactical victories in these arenas over the last decade or so, and will no doubt win others in the years to come, we simply cannot rely on more than winning tactical defensive stopgaps in these theatres of conflict. While this stage of operations might be referred to as “Plan A”, we need a well-organized and prepared “Plan B” if we intend to win this important fight.

Once upon a time, rail workers did not have unions. So, they built them. Rails did not have lawyers and politicians, courts or legislation to win the day for them. They engaged in strikes and other “industrial actions,” conducted mass rallies and pickets, engaged other workers and community members, fought for and won everything we hold dear today. This was the original Plan B that was not the Plan B then, it was simply THE Plan. And while we may engage in court and arbitration battles, lobby legislation at the state and federal levels and push for federal protective regulation through the FRA and other government agencies, we must never forget the original source of our power, and be ready, willing and able to use it.

RWU invites all rank and file workers and our rail unions to organize this “Plan B” so that it is ready when (and we believe it is simply a question of *when*) Plan A has reached the end of the road, we can combat the carriers and save the two-person crew. We urge that the unions, with their vast resources and infrastructure, paid staff personnel, dues base, treasury and communica-



tion network engage immediately in any and all of the following:

- Outreach to the community and the general population through creative use of the media.
- Create articles, flyers, and videos to explain our perspective to other unions, politicians, community organizations and potential allies.
- Erect billboards at major terminals to show the carriers we are determined to win, and to encourage and embolden our members to resist.
- Conduct rallies and pickets at major terminals that motivate and empower our members, while we impress the carriers, the media, the community and the labor movement that we are serious and ready.
- Produce stickers, buttons, T-shirts, banners and other paraphernalia to publicize the struggle and to motivate and encourage our ranks.
- Open up the bargaining process to allow membership input and support. Call upon the membership to back up the bargaining process with displays of solidarity and strength.

The list of creative tactics that we can employ is limited only by our imaginations. Non-violent actions that build up our solidarity, that empower us, that win others to our cause, and that serve to bolster our determination and spirit are on the table. We need look no further than the great social movements of the last century – including the labor movement – to uncover a treasure trove of creative and effective means to build up our defenses and ability to prevail in the fight.

For the record, Railroad Workers United stands at the ready to aid and assist – just like we did in 2014 – any and all workers and unions willing to fight back against single person crews. We have been working tirelessly on this issue since our founding in 2008. We have a burgeoning network of dedicated rank & file rail workers, community supporters and environmental activists nationwide, versant in this issue, and at the ready to confront the Class One rail carriers when the gauntlet is laid down, as it most assuredly will be in the months and years ahead. We are infinitely more prepared for a showdown than we were in 2014. But so are the rail carriers. That’s why we are calling on the rail unions to take the actions above. The best way to win a fight is to be prepared for it. And the best defense is a good offense. Let’s get moving! *Highball!*