

Trainmen and Engineers Win Contract, Maintain Two-Person Crews at W&LE

In January, engineers and trainmen of the Wheeling & Lake Erie – members of BLET #292 - voted to approve a hard-fought Tentative Agreement that was years in the making. For seven long years – and all told for more than a decade, members of both crafts have fought valiantly against the carrier's desire to implement single employee train crews. Their struggle attracted the support of RWU when both crafts struck the W&LE in October of 2013 (see *The Highball*, Fall 2013).

While the workers did not get all that they deserve, the contract represents a victory for rail labor. Running single-person trains was the pet issue of W&LE management for years, and in the face of determined resistance to the proposal by engineers and trainmen, the rail carrier backed down. A 79% majority of voting members ratified the engineers contract, with 80% of voting members voting in favor of the trainman contract. The overwhelming majority of workers in both crafts cast a ballot.

For seven long years the workers held out for this contract, having exchanged Section 6 notices way back in early January of 2012. The agreements for both crafts extend for seven years – until 2026 - and govern work rules, rates of pay, and health & welfare issues for the roughly 75 engineers and 130 trainmen.

BLET President Dennis Pierce acknowledged the contract vote,

stating, "This is a significant victory for our members and for our Brotherhood." Curiously however, in both the email communique from the BLET and the article in the *Locomotive Engineer & Trainmen News*, he failed to reference the centrality of the single employee crew issue in their struggle.

The W&LE is one of the larger "regional railroads" in North America, running trains on 840 miles of track in Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Maryland. The W&LE handles more than 140,000 carloads annually and interchanges with three Class I railroads (CSX, Canadian National and Norfolk Southern) and numerous smaller roads.

The significance of this victory cannot be underestimated. Due to their efforts, together with those of the trainmen on the BNSF (members of SMART GO-001) the rail carriers, large and small, have come up empty handed in their war on the two-person train crew. While we have managed to stave off the scourge of single employee crews for more than a decade, the rail carriers have not given up. Now with PTC coming online, we expect a full-frontal assault by the Class I carriers in the coming months and years. All railroaders should take courage from the heroic actions of our brothers on the Wheeling & Lake Erie. Their struggle has been our struggle. Now it is up to the rest of us!