

Rail Labor Activists Build Solidarity Caucus

By Ron Kaminkow

Rail Labor activists from across North America are coming together to form a new cross-craft inter-union caucus that includes all rail workers in North America. Membership is open to union members from all the various unions (once known as the “brotherhoods”) in this new organization. In addition, special efforts will be made to include Canadian and Mexican workers as well.

To build this broad based unity and solidarity, the activists have launched Railroad Workers United (RWU). “We want everyone to understand that we are not creating another rail union to compete with those already in existence”, explains Jon Flanders, member of Machinists #1145 in Selkirk, NY. “Instead, we are creating an industry-wide caucus where we can all come together to help each other build the solidarity, support, democracy and strength that is missing in our individual craft unions. Who knows what the potentials and possibilities could be for such an organization of all rail labor.”

Designed to be a dues-paying membership-based organization, RWU will include among its ranks, members of the following unions:

- United Transportation Union (UTU), the largest rail union, which represents most trainmen and yardmasters and some engineers, now scheduled to merge on January 1, 2008, with the Sheet Metal Workers.
- Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, (BLET), an affiliate of the Teamsters Rail Conference.
- The Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED), also a member union of the Teamsters Rail Conference.
- Transportation Communication Union (TCU), itself an amalgamation of seven previous rail unions. (TCU is an affiliate of the Machinists union).
- Brotherhood of Railway Carmen (BRC), the largest TCU affiliate.
- Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen (BRS).
- American Train Dispatchers Association (ATDA).
- International Association of Machinists (IAM).
- International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW).
- Sheet Metal Workers International Association (SMWIA).
- International Association of Boilermakers, Blacksmiths, Iron Ship Builders, Forgers & Helpers.
- National Conference of Firemen & Oilers (NCFO), an affiliate of SEIU.
- Transportation Workers Union (TWU).

“We have been divided – craft against craft, union against union, terminal against terminal – for too long,” claims Joe Wyman, UTU trainman in Tucson, AZ. And now, with the dramatic increase in trans-border freight movements between all three nations of our continent, and the gobbling up of major Mexican rail lines by U.S. based rail carriers, organizers suspect it is only a question of time before the carriers effectively play one country’s railroaders off against another. Wyman goes on to say, “We know we will truly be stronger by including all railroaders in North America – from Canada and Mexico as well as the U.S.”

The impetus and energy for the building of such an organization largely comes from Railroad Operating Crafts United (ROCU). Organized itself in the spring of 2005, ROCU’s goal was to end the warfare between the two unions that represent the operating crafts -- the BLET and the UTU – and to

unite them into a single powerful and democratic union. While the organization was extremely popular with the rank-and-file of both unions and had some successes, it ultimately floundered due to the failure of UTU and BLET union officials to reach accommodation. Earlier this year, the BLET settled on a contract in master freight bargaining with the national carriers, while the UTU has been left out in the cold. In addition, some on-property agreements re-fueled the UTU-BLET conflict. Feeling betrayed by what it perceives as a hostile BLET, the UTU ran for cover into the arms of the Sheet Metal Workers, and has now merged with the SMWIA to become SMART – Sheet Metal, Air, Rail & Transportation Workers, an affiliate of the AFL-CIO. With the BLET firmly affiliated with the Teamsters (IBT), an affiliate of the Change-to-Win Coalition, ROCU realized that hope for a merger between the operating craft unions was all but lost in the convoluted quagmire of business unionism of the 21st century.

“Rather than continue to beat our heads against the wall in face of the determination of the officials of the BLET and the UTU to remain separate and at war with each other”, states Union Pacific engineer Ed Michael of Salem, IL., “we decided to put our energy into building something that most of us already believe in, or have come to believe in, as a result of our experience in ROCU. We believe that an organization of all rail labor is the key to building real rank-and-file power in our industry.” And while RWU continues, in principle, to support the concept of a united single union of the operating crafts (and all of rail labor), this will not be the focus of its work. Rather, RWU aims to build a *solidarity movement* of all rail labor in the struggle with the carriers.

“It doesn’t take a genius to see that the fractured nature of rail labor presents a stumbling block to achieving any real union power in the face of hostile rail carriers,” notes Jen Wallis, BNSF conductor in Seattle, WA. Since the first rail workers began to organize in the 1860’s rail labor has been divided into these archaic and cumbersome craft unions which are more often prone to compete, rather than cooperate, with each other. The divisive nature of craft unionism was not lost on Eugene Victor Debs and other forward thinking rail union leaders of their day. In the 1890’s these leaders organized a gallant attempt to build a single union of rail workers to unite all under the banner of the American Railway Union. The organization was wildly popular with the rank-and-file of all crafts and within months the ARU had 250,000 members! The new organization was so successful that the carriers feared its awesome power to bring the railroads to their knees. Together with the federal courts and US government, the ARU was violently crushed, its records confiscated, its leaders jailed. But it had proven its strength and effectiveness, and the desire for such an organization lives on in the hearts of railroaders across North America. The name of Eugene V. Debs is revered among rail unionists to this day.

While RWU is not an attempt to build a new union like the ARU, there are similarities. RWU includes members of all the various craft unions on all properties. Membership is open to all railroaders who share RWU’s goal of building a “solidarity and unity caucus” among railroaders and to act as a support group for workers in their struggles. “We are building a network of railroaders across North America, to help educate one another about the issues, inform each other about our individual struggles, and to actively lend support and solidarity when one or another group of us is locked in battle with any carrier.” states Kevin Thompson, UTU conductor with Amtrak in Reno, NV.

To these ends, RWU will specifically engage in the following activities:

- Support candidates, who actively support RWU goals and principles, for leadership positions in the various unions.
- Support movements for democracy and accountability within the various rail unions
- Build unity between unions at the next round of bargaining.

- Act as a solidarity organization locally, regionally and nationally by building awareness and support for each others' job actions, strikes, etc.
- Develop a newsletter to be distributed continent wide with news and views about the rail labor unity movement and various struggles across North America.
- Develop and maintain an up-to-the-minute website to augment the newsletter, providing railroaders with timely information about rank-and-file issues.
- Support mergers between rail unions where they make sense and empower the rank-and-file.
- Build local chapters in terminals to more effectively recruit new members, build solidarity at the base, and support the general organization.
- Get behind national legislative campaigns that would benefit rail workers, facilitate union organizing, and benefit the working class in general.

But RWU is not just about building solidarity. Organizers claim that the problem of rail labor is not just its divided and fractured nature, but one of moribund bureaucracy and the lack of internal democracy. "Union leaders are all too often out-of-touch with the needs and wishes of their membership", claims Hugh Sawyer, NS engineer in Atlanta, GA. and Local Chairman of BLET #316. Through tightly controlled conventions, no direct elections for top officers, and an entrenched "good old boy" network, rank-and-file members are excluded and alienated from day-to-day union affairs. Sawyer continues, "Add to this the pay, special perks and privileges enjoyed by the union hierarchy, and you have a union more concerned with the preservation and enhancement of the lifestyle of its officers than that of its members."

RWU has drawn up a "Statement of Principles" to act as a guide to its work. Those railroaders wishing to join the organization are expected to agree with and support RWU's principles and goals which include support for the following:

- Unity of all Railroad Crafts
- An End to Inter-Union Conflict
- Rank-and-file Democracy
- Union Membership Education, Participation and Action
- Solidarity: "An Injury to One is an Injury to All!"
- Coordinated Bargaining -- No to Concessions

An "Interim Steering Committee" drawing from the ranks of all crafts and all unions has been set up to guide the group until its founding convention. The convention is scheduled to take place Friday, April 11th, 2008, and is planned to coincide with the Labor Notes Conference in Detroit that weekend. There, the delegates present expect to formally adopt a name, a Statement of Principles, a constitution and bylaws, and will debate and discuss various resolutions. Organizers are inviting workers from all carriers, all crafts and all unions in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. All rail unionists who support the interim "Statement of Principles" and are willing to join and pay dues are welcome to attend and participate in the founding convention.

For more information, including a copy of the RWU Statement of Principles, please contact the RWU at 206-984-3051: email to info@railroadworkersunited.org; or see the website www.railroadworkersunited.org.