

Democracy: Membership Mobilization is Key to Victory

While construction of a national grand bargaining coalition of all rail labor is vital if we are to build a future for rail labor based upon resisting concessions and winning good contracts, in and of itself it is not enough. In addition, we need the active participation of the rank-and-file in the whole process, beginning to end. Railroad Workers United has a slogan: "unity, solidarity, democracy". The concepts all work as one. Much of this newsletter has talked about the former, unity and solidarity. This commentary will address the third concept - democracy.

COMMENTARY

A union bargaining committee and union officials have only so much power at the table if they lack an informed and motivated membership to back up the leadership. This is true whether the bargaining team is bargaining a local agreement, a master contract, or in this case, a cross craft agreement negotiated by a coordinated bargaining coalition.

Long before the exchange of section 6 notices and the commencement of contract negotiations, all rail unions should be informing their membership that the process is on the horizon. Members need to be informed of how bargaining works under the Railway Labor Act, how the process will proceed, and a timeline of activity. Importantly, all members should be polled for their opinion as to what is important in bargaining. The membership should be the ones to determine, democratically through various surveys, what are the key issues in bargaining. They should be the ones to outline priorities that the union should strive for. They should be the ones to identify what concessions may be acceptable and which ones are downright intolerable.

Local unions should advertise local meetings in such a fashion to gain the greatest possible attendance. Local unions in large rail centers like Chicago and St. Louis might want to consider this an opportunity to conduct special joint region wide meetings to consider this vital matter. We want to get our members talking, get them fired up about the union and the negotiations process. Announce the upcoming contract talks on the union bulletin board and in the pages of the local union newsletter and on the website. Internationals should mail out survey forms or "bargaining demand forms" to all members soliciting their written input into the process. Information explaining ways in which the membership can participate can be included.

Once the Section 6 notices have been exchanged on November 1, the unions need to communicate to their members the exact content of both the union's and the carriers' exchange. This is vital so that the members are aware of what their union's position is and what the company's position is. In many cases, knowing this information will fire members up to win their collectively expressed demands, and/or to defeat the company's demand for concessions. Also at this time, the unions may want to take steps to mobilize their membership.

January 1, 2010 is the official end of our current national agreements with the National Carriers Conference Committee (NCCC), the umbrella group for most of the major U.S. based carriers. However, under the terms of the RLA, the contract terms continue until resolution in one form or another has been reached. Unions should communicate on a regular basis with their membership as to the state and progress (or lack thereof) in bargaining. Special "Bargaining Updates" can be issued, not just to keep the members informed, but to involve them in the whole process. If the carriers are being intransigent and want to play hardball with us, the rank-and-file can be called upon to fight back. Rallies, pickets, demonstrations, parades, the use of buttons, T-shirts, armbands all have the effect of building solidarity and show the company that the union bargaining team has the support of the rank-and-file. We need to get our families and communities involved. Our unions can take this opportunity to reach out to other unions, central labor bodies, and citizens' groups. We need to impress the carriers that we mean business. Who knows just what this informed and mobilized membership may do next? This is the workplace mood that we need to create to back up our bargaining team.

Unfortunately our union officials are not always supportive of this kind of union activism. Years of cautious conservatism has infected their brains. It is up to all of us rank-and-file members to demand they respond to us. Demand special meetings to discuss contract negotiations. Demand regular bargaining updates. Demand to be kept informed and demand to be brought into the process. We have a couple hundred thousand railroaders in the U.S. today. Let's demand that we all be informed and involved. And this time around let's win!

