

A Brief History of the Attack on the Two-Employee Crew

Ron Kaminkow, RWU General Secretary, BLET #51 Amtrak, Reno,

After achieving the near universal two employee train crew in the 1990s, the carriers did not waste a whole lot of time before they set their sights on eliminating that second worker and achieving the single employee crew. And while they have yet to achieve their goal, make no mistake, this is indeed their objective.

The first shot in the war on the two employee crew was fired when in 2003, the carriers reached agreement with the UTU to implement RCO with a UTU represented conductor at the controls of the box. This agreement has decimated the ranks of yard engineers all across the country. By the end of the decade, the carriers had implemented single employee RCO crews in the yard and on certain roads, they appear to be expanding their use ever more.

Meantime, the attack on the road conductor has proceeded apace. The ongoing hostility between the two unions of the operating crafts has facilitated this attack, as the carriers play each union and each craft against the other. The UTU has long maintained that it is not especially worried since it has a "crew consist agreement" which it is counting on to preserve a UTU-represented employee on the locomotive of every train. While the BLET appears to not be especially worried as it believes that all trains must have an engineer, and the BLET holds the contract representing that craft.

As a result of this narrow parochial approach to the issue, the unions did not utter a word when in November of 2004, the National Carriers Conference Committee (NCCC) dropped this bombshell in the form of a Section 6 Notice: *"All train and engine service positions should be consolidated ... the work formerly performed separately by the train and engine service positions be performed by 'qualified transportation employees' ... crew size shall be based on operational needs as determined by the railroad..."* But a group of rank and filers, engineers and conductors both, came together and formed Railroad Operating Crafts United (ROCU) and proceeded to educate the membership of both unions about the proposal and the need for rail labor unity of the unions of the operating crafts. Throughout 2005 ROCU lobbied the unions to unify, to stand together and to take action against this proposal for single employee operations.

Finally, in January, 2006, the presidents of the UTU and the BLET called a joint press conference and declared their opposition to any plan for single employee crews. But unfortunately just over a year later, the BLET's Dennis Pierce (at that time General Chairman on the BNSF property) cut a deal opening the door to RCO operations on the mainline. Under this plan, his union would be the one to represent the worker who dismounts and straps on the box. The UTU cried foul, the delicate truce was broken and the craft war would re-escalate with a vengeance.

Since that time, various rail carriers have run experimental trains with various technologies that appear to require just one -- or even no -- employees aboard the locomotive. And while none of this has yet to be regularly implemented, technology is being prepared for the crew reduction that the carriers fully anticipate. These technologies continue to be tested regularly while the unions seem to be oblivious to the threat they pose to their members' livelihoods.

Then in 2010 on the CSX property, it was the UTU's turn to cut a deal in the interest of "job security". Perhaps in a moment of weakness, losing faith in their beloved "crew consist" agreement that every train must have a UTU conductor aboard, the union agreed to language that provides for the use of "utility conductors" out on the road. Similar to utility brakemen that were implemented in the 1990s to work in the yard, these utility men would similarly service one or more trains, attaching themselves to the crew as necessary and then moving on. Like the BNSF -- BLET agreement of 2007, there is of course no mention of single employee operations, but come on, why else would you need a utility man out on the road? Likewise, why would an engineer need to strap on a belt pack if there was a conductor in the cab to do the job?

So here we are. On the one hand we have the BLET saying our guys can do the whole job, just let us be the ones to use the belt pack on the road. On the other hand we have the UTU saying, OK, we can see that single employee trains are in the works, let's save some jobs for our guys rather than have the BLET guys get all the work. And all the while the testing of new technology to grease the wheels of single employee operations goes merrily on, unfettered not one bit by union protest or interference..

This is a pretty grim scenario fellow workers. But single employee operations are not inevitable at all. Our unions do not have to be at each others' throats. The operating crafts are not predestined to stab each other in the back. We still have the option of solidarity. The leadership can still be pushed by the rank and file to stand together against single employee crews like they did briefly in 2006.

But it ain't gonna happen without you. Please read the editorial by former RWU Co-Chair and ROCU founder Ed Michael on Page S4 of this supplement to [The Highball](#) to see what we can do to create a whole different scenario, one that can stave off single employee operations and preserve the two employee crew.

Ron Kaminkow is the General Secretary of RWU. A former employee of both Conrail and NS, he currently works for Amtrak in Reno, NV. In 2005, along with other midwestern rails, he co-founded Railroad Operating Crafts United.

