RWU Third Convention Emphasizes Working Class Solidarity

Chicago, Illinois, the railroad capital of the world, was a fitting location to host the Third Biennial Convention of Railroad Workers United. On May 4th, RWU members gathered to conduct the business of the organization – to consider proposed bylaws changes, hear reports from various members, and to adopt a series of resolutions. We also heard from an array of guest speakers and in the evening we celebrated with a raucous hospitality suite.

From the opening gavel the theme that resonated throughout the day was one of unity, democracy and especially – one of solidarity. Labor activist Jane Slaughter from Labor Notes set the tone, reminding the Convention that our event was just one small part of the larger Labor Notes Conference which was scheduled for the entire weekend. Labor Notes publishes a monthly magazine and sponsors the conference every couple years. Their slogan is “putting the movement back in the labor movement,” and their conference brings together over a thousand labor activists from across the U.S. and around the world. This year’s event set a record with more than 1400 activists – including a number of railroaders -- taking part in the entire weekend of activity.

Solidarity & Guest Speakers

A highlight of the Convention was the array of dynamic speakers who addressed the body throughout the course of the day. RWU was founded on six basic principles, one of which is solidarity – between all railroad workers of all crafts and all unions throughout North America. In addition, we believe in the larger solidarity of ALL labor, and therefore aim to build member-to-member relationships with workers in related industries, an outlook that was clearly manifest by the choice of speakers who addressed the Convention. James Hill, vice president of United Electrical Workers (UE) Local #1077 and a Renzenberger crew van driver in Chicago, talked about the efforts to organize rail crew van drivers into the union. He explained how and why railroad workers can play a vital role in this effort. Railroaders should support these sisters and brothers out of solidarity and out of self-interest as well. Our lives are on the line! Thousands of rail crews ride in these vans every day, which are all too often driven by poorly trained, overworked, underpaid, and at times heavily fatigued drivers. It is in all of our interest to see these workers organized, unionized and provided with the wages, benefits and decent working conditions and the respect that they deserve.

We also heard from Tiecoura Traore, former rail union leader from Mali, Africa. In 2004 Tiecoura lost his job when the railway was sold off to private interests. He recounted how all the villages along the line lost service and are now isolated as a result, all this in the name of years. Their slogan is “putting the movement back in the labor movement,” and their conference brings together over a thousand labor activists from across the U.S. and around the world. This year’s event set a record with more than 1400 activists – including a number of railroaders – taking part in the entire weekend of activity.

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RWU Elects New Steering Committee for the Next Two Years

At the 2012 Convention held in Chicago May 4th, RWU members present elected a new International Steering Committee (ISC) to guide the organization through the next two years until the Convention in 2014.

The members of the Steering Committee are all working railroaders except our treasurer who is now retired. Eight have served at least one previous term while three are newcomers. They range in seniority from 1 to 41 years.

Mark Burrows: Mark assumes one of the three Co-Chair positions in his first term on the Steering Committee. He works as an engineer in Bensenville, IL (Chicago) for CP Rail and is a member of UTU #1433 and the local’s current delegate, attending the UTU Convention last summer. Brother Mark hired out in 1974 and worked for the Chicago Northwestern (CNW) until 1986, later hiring out with the Soo Line in 1991 where he was involved in the 47-day strike in 1994. He has worked for Soo/CP for 21 years now and currently works a PM switch job in the Chicago area. Mark has been a member of both the BLET and UTU at various times over the past 38 years.

Steve Desavouret: Steve returns to the position of alternate to the ISC after serving the previous term on the Committee. He is a member of TCU #6608 and former Recording Secretary of the local. Brother Steve has worked as a car inspector in the Chicago area for more than two decades, first for the BN in Cicero, IL. and more recently for the CN-IC in Homewood, IL.

Robert Hill: Robert assumes his second term on the Steering Committee after serving his first term as one of the RWU Co-Chairs. He has been chairing the RWU Website Committee since 2009. Brother Robert hired out in 2001 as a conductor and joined his UTU local; he currently works as a BNSF engineer on a road extra board out of Vancouver, WA. and is currently serving as the Legislative Rep for BLET #758.

Robert Hull: This is Robert’s first term on the Steering Committee after hiring out on the BNSF in 2011 as a conductor. Robert is a member and a Trustee of UTU #199 out of Creston, IA where he works the road extra board. Prior to hiring out, Brother Rob formerly worked as a heavy equipment operator and was a member of the Operating Engineers (OE) union in Des Moines, IA.

Jon Flanders: Jon previously served two terms as RWU Co-Chair and now assumes his third term on the RWU Steering Committee. Brother Jon heads up the effort each year for the RWU sponsored Railroad Workers Memorial Day. Jon is current Vice President of the Troy Area Labor Council AFL-CIO in Troy, NY and is the former President and Local Chairman of Machinists (IAM) #1145. Currently the lodge’s “Educator”, Jon has worked as a diesel mechanic for CSX and before that for Conrail in Selkirk, NY for the past 24 years.

RWU Elects New Steering Committee for the Next Two Years

Railroad Workers United was organized in April 2008 at a Founding Convention in Dearborn, MI. RWU grew out of decades of struggle within the craft unions for unity, solidarity, and democracy. We are carrying on a tradition of rank-and-file activity which dates back to the 1890s and the time of Eugene V. Debs.

RWU is a cross-craft inter-union caucus of rail labor activists across North America. All rail workers of all crafts from all carriers who support our Statement of Principles are welcome to join in our efforts. Please write, call or email the address below.

Statement of Principles

- Unity of All Rail Crafts
- An End to Inter-Union Conflict
- Rank-and-File Democracy
- Membership Participation & Action
- Solidarity Among All Railroaders
- No to Concessionary Bargaining

RWU Elects New Steering Committee for the Next Two Years

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Ron Kaminkow: Ron has served as the RWU Secretary and now as General Secretary since 2008, and currently heads up the RWU Newsletter Committee. Prior to hiring out as a brakeman with Conrail in 1996, he served as President of AFSCME Local 634 in Madison, WI. In 2005, Brother Ron helped to found Railroad Operating Crafts United (ROCU), an RWU predecessor. A former brakeman/conductor/engineer for Conrail and later NS in Chicago (UTU #168) and Elkhart, IN (UTU #194), Ron currently is working as an Amtrak engineer in Reno, NV where he is a member of BLET #51.

Ed Michael: Ed previously served two terms as RWU Co-Chair and with retirement imminent, declined to run for a third term. Ed is currently chairing the RWU Safety Committee, and is a member of both UTU #979 and BLET #724 in Salem, IL where he works as an engineer for Union Pacific. Brother Ed hired out in 1970 with the Chicago & Eastern Illinois (C&EI) and the Missouri Pacific in the St. Louis area and later the UP out of Salem, IL until his retirement in 2005 after 36 years as a switchman and conductor. Brother Ed served for many years as Legislative Rep for UTU #979 and helped to launch Railroad Operating Crafts United (ROCU) in 2005.

Shaun Kelley: Shaun has assumed one of the three Co-Chair positions in his first term on the Steering Committee. He comes from a big railroad family -- which includes father, brother, grandfather, sons-in-law, and nephew among others -- and has worked for the railroad for 39 years. He currently works the road extra board out of Creston, IA on the BNSF and is a member of BLET #642. Brother Shaun is the first Vice Chairman of the BLET Iowa State Legislative Board and has served on the board for 16 years. First hiring on the BN as a track worker and BMWE member, Shaun soon entered train service, then became a fireman and later engineer, belonging at various times to the BLET or the UTU over the years.

Mike Matson: After serving first as an alternate for a term, then as a member of the Steering Committee for a term, Mike will now serve once again as first Alternate. Mike has worked for Canadian Pacific in St. Paul, MN and Winona, MN for 9 years. He is a member and Trustee of UTU Local #911 and currently works the second shift local switch job in Winona, MN.

Hugh Sawyer: Hugh was elected one of the original three Co-Chairs of RWU in 2008 and after a two year hiatus from the Steering Committee, now returns to that position. He is the current President of BLET #316 in Atlanta, GA. A former Local Chairman, Hugh and his division have been instrumental in the struggle to win -- and then preserve and protect -- one-member-one-vote officer elections in the BLET. Brother Hugh has served on the Steering Committee of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and has been active in BLET national affairs.

John Wright: This will be J.P.'s second term on the RWU Steering Committee and his first term to serve as the newly created position of Organizer. Brother J.P. comes from a union family (CWA, IBEW and BRS) and has worked on the railroad for 11 years. He is a CSX extra board engineer, working various territories that radiate out of the Louisville, KY hub, and currently serves as the Secretary-Treasurer for BLET #78. J.P. is a former conductor and member of UTU #376. John currently serves on the Steering Committee of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU).

James Wallace: James is new to the Steering Committee this year, having earlier this spring assumed the position of Recording Secretary for RWU. Brother James is chairing the RWU Committee on Single Employee Crews. He currently works as a road conductor for the BNSF out of Lincoln, NE and is a member of UTU #305 having worked for the company for a year and a half now.

Chet Whyers: Chet is currently serving his third term on the RWU Steering Committee and has been the organization’s Treasurer since its founding in 2008. Chet worked for the Chicago & Eastern Illinois (C&EI) and the Missouri Pacific in the St. Louis area and later the UP out of Salem, IL until his retirement in 2005 after 36 years as a switchman and conductor. Brother Chet served for many years as Legislative Rep for UTU #979 and helped to launch Railroad Operating Crafts United (ROCU) in 2005.

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private profit. Brother Traore is involved in an organization called “Rails without Borders”, and association of railroad worker and community organizations in a number of countries around the world. RWU is looking into the prospects of membership.

From Mexico City, Benedicto Martinez, a co-president of the Authentic Workers Front (FAT), a democratic and independent organization of Mexican workers spoke about the need for trans-border solidarity of labor. Like in Mali, the railroad in Mexico has been privatized in recent years. In this case, most of the rails south of the border are now owned outright by U.S. based rail carriers – namely KCS and UP. Brother Martinez noted that Canadian rail companies operate extensively in the U.S. So given that the rail carriers operate transnationally without concern for the boundaries of all three nations, it is imperative that we build bridges of international solidarity among the railroad workers of Canada, the U.S. and Mexico. All North American rail workers should stand shoulder to shoulder with one another and support each other. Because we all work for the same carriers, use the same standard gauge, utilize the same cars and locomotives, it only makes sense that we stand together in unity and solidarity.

Railroad workers and all private sector workers must understand the struggle of public employees who are under such vicious attack, and appreciate that if the anti-union forces succeed in crippling the public sector unions, then we are surely next. The same forces that are attacking public workers and their unions would love nothing more than to see the destruction of our unions in the private sector as well.

A Voice for Union-Based Safety

Nancy Lessin, our fifth speaker, spoke about the struggle in the industrial workplace setting to overcome the scourge of “behavior based safety.” BBS (or BS for short) is the rule of thumb on the railroad and is a scheme whereby the employer introduces a “safety program” often in conjunction and in complicity with the union and rank & file members, in order to shift the blame for all accidents and injuries onto the workers themselves. This redirects blame away from the company, thereby alleviating the carrier of fixing the hazards, reduces the number of reportable injuries, and disrupts our solidarity on the job. RWU has been working to expose the existence and the farce of such schemes since our founding convention in 2008. Nancy has been a great asset to railroad workers, most recently headlining a safety conference in Iowa City in November 2011 (see The Highball, Winter 2012).

Resolutions of Solidarity

The Convention adopted six resolutions all of which continue to play on this theme of solidarity and worker unity. The first resolution placed RWU squarely in support of rail crew van drivers and calls on the rail unions – especially the UTU and the BLET – to get involved and to actively support the organizing efforts. The second is similar, pledging RWU support for our brothers and sister in the locomotive building industry that are under concerted attack by the two major locomotive builders of North America – GE and CAT. Three members of UE Local #506 in Erie, PA where most GE locos are currently built were in attendance at the Convention. A resolution condemning “discriminatory bargaining” whereby one segment of the bargaining unit gains at the detriment of another, was adopted in an effort to put
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an end to this harmful and divisive practice which has long lasting and detrimental effects upon intra-union solidarity. Two other resolutions pledge RWU’s solidarity to workers engaged in strike action and demand that our craft union leadership do the same and advise the membership not to cross picket lines and pledge to have their back when they take such action. These resolutions were inspired by the complete and total silence on the part of both the UTU and BLET officialdom during the longshore workers struggle last fall where our members were expected to run trains across ILWU picket lines.

Political Independence

A final resolution was adopted following much discussion and debate to condemn both the Democrats and the Republicans for their mutual failure to support working people. Rather than support either political party in the fall, RWU calls for a labor party based upon the power of the unions and the working class. RWU has never supported candidates from within the established political parties, dominated as they are by big business. These conservative parties and the established politicians are akin to our tired old unions and the entrenched union officialdom – part of the problem, not the solution. Following a series of amendments, the final version of the resolution was warmly endorsed by the Convention.

A New Steering Committee

For the next two years, RWU will be guided by a new Steering Committee made up of 11 members (see Pages 2 & 3). Three of the eleven are newcomers to the Committee. Meantime, we elected three brand new Co-Chairs as two of the previous Co-chairs will be retiring in the coming years and decided it best not to serve in this capacity, while another declined to run for the position due to time constraints with other union matters. Nevertheless, all three former co-chairs were happy to serve on the Steering Committee and as a result, we now have a governing body which includes three current and three former co-chairs.

Building for the Future

Numerous reports were read at the Convention, each followed by a lively discussion. Regarding our newsletter, RWU needs to develop and broaden distribution of The Highball in the coming years. On the safety front, we continue to make progress in our efforts to debunk behavior based safety (see above). As for organizing, we amended the bylaws to provide for a 7th Executive Board member known as the “Organizer” to get serious about building the membership and expanding the reach and influence of RWU. Plans are afoot for our annual Railroad Workers Memorial Day on June 15th, the fourth year that RWU has sponsored this event. This year we plan to focus on the issue of crossing safety, in particular the hazards that dangerous crossings present to railroad workers. Regarding communications, we will explore ways to improve our website and make use of the various social media to get our message out there. We will continue to hammer away at the single employee crew issue and hold fast to our guns that NO job – yard or road --should be staffed by a lone employee. And, despite their resistance and narrow sectarianism, we will continue our efforts to bring the craft unions together into One Big Bargaining Coalition.

RWU certainly has our work cut out for us in the coming years. The challenges facing railroaders are many. But if we can stick together and commit ourselves to the struggle, we have a fighting chance. Railroaders are few in number these days, but ironically as a result, we have more power than ever before … but only if and when we choose to exercise it. Building solidarity, unity and democracy is the necessary foundation that RWU is working to build. And atop this foundation we are striving to build a mass movement -- “the rank and file in action”. Our efforts are beginning to bear fruit but we will fall short of our goals without the participation of railroaders across North America like you. Won’t you consider joining RWU today? Become a part of something you can believe in. We’ll see you at the next Convention in 2014. Solidarity forever!
Defeat in Wisconsin: An Alternative Strategy for Next Time

On June 5th, despite the efforts of organized labor and the citizens of Wisconsin, right-wing anti-labor Governor Scott Walker held onto his seat, beating back his Democratic challenger Tom Barrett by a larger margin than in the 2010 election. The question that working people and our unions need to ask is “What went wrong?”

Rather than simply gloss over this disastrous defeat (as some unions like the UTU have done) we need to take an honest look at what happened and have an open discussion about what we could have done differently since the “Battle of Wisconsin” began on February 14, 2012.

EDITORIAL

Regarding the Democratic Party strategy, there are a number of glaring flaws from the start. First, the party chose to run the same candidate Tom Barrett, who had already run and lost to Walker just 18 months previous. Barrett is no friend of organized labor, working people or the poor, and is decidedly moderate. Second, the party declined to talk about the whole issue of collective bargaining and workers’ rights, despite the fact that the whole uprising, occupation, and recall effort itself would not have happened had it not been for the efforts of organized labor. Third, rather than reach out to constituencies harmed by Walker’s agenda and attempt to build a broader workers movement, promising to extend the benefits of unionism to all workers, Barrett offered little to motivate the working class.

But long before the recall process was even underway, in fact, before the protests had even simmered down, forces within the Democratic Party and the trade union officialdom had been turning the screws to corral the militancy of the uprising and channel it into “respectable” directions. Urging just “wait until November”, they were drawn reluctantly into the recall fight, offering limited support even here.

Early on, the teachers engaged in spontaneous strike action, thousands of students struck in solidarity, the Capitol was occupied, and calls went out for some kind of “general strike” action by rank & file activists, left groups and even the local central labor council. But the union hierarchy insisted that actions of this nature were off the table and refused to even threaten industrial action at all. They would push for all efforts to instead be redirected into the electoral arena. This single minded approach, this failure to pursue a multifaceted strategy which included not just electoralism but public protest and industrial action, has proven to be catastrophic for our cause.

The net result is that once again, the labor officialdom and the Democratic Party have led the working class to defeat. At our recent Convention (see article Page 5), RWU adopted a resolution that supports a political course for labor that is independent of the established political parties. Rather than supporting the parties of big business, we should support a labor party that has the strength and support of working people and organized labor behind it. But this of course is not enough. Workers and our unions cannot simply place our hopes in any elected officials to fight our battles and save our asses. That role will primarily be – and always will be – our job.

Workers need to recognize our common interest and build networks of solidarity and power where we work. When we know that the electoral system is hopelessly riddles with the tentacles of big business at every turn (e.g. Walker outspent Barrett by 8-to-1!), we need to get back to basics. Our unions were not built at the ballot box. Good wages, benefits and working conditions were not handed to you by some politician. They were fought for and won by working people just like you, with strikes, picket lines, occupations, and workplace action.

So what could we have done differently? It should be obvious now to most union activists that demobilizing and channeling all of our resources into the recall was surely a mistake. Walker was given a year to regain his composure and momentum (Labor made the same mistake in the Verizon strike last year – when you have your opponent on the ropes, never back away and give him time to recover!). The unions could have better spent their time and energy organizing their members (and former members) whose lives had been shattered by the legislation.

So we can cry about being outspent, and we can spin the story in order to see the “bright side”, and we can look forward to the “next” election. Or we can educate, organize, and prepare for the next battle better equipped for the fight with a strategy and a tactics that – while perhaps unappealing to the Democratic Party and the labor bureaucracy – empowers the rank and file and is one designed to win!
The Fight Against Single Employee Crews Starts NOW!

You don’t hear much talk about single employee crews these days. But just because the carriers’ are keeping mum on the subject, don’t think for a moment that they have lost interest in the concept. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the past few years have seen a number of moves by the carriers to better equip them for the time when they decide to once again move forward with this ill conceived notion.

COMMENTARY

The rail carriers want to run trains with one employee. And they want to do it asap. The only thing that ultimately is going to stand in their way is railroad workers – especially the train crews -- and our ability to unite across crafts and across trade union jurisdictional lines to mount and all-out fight to stop them.

For those of you who doubt that this is the carriers’ goal, we direct you to the Section 6 Notices presented on November 1, 2004 from the NCCC to both the BLET and the UTU. The carriers’ lone demand to both unions was identical: eliminate both the conductor and engineer and replace them with a “transportation employee”. The carrier would then be the sole party to determine the necessary manpower for each job. The carriers eventually retreated from this position in the face of a ROCU orchestrated uprising, but they had played their hand for all to see.

But don’t think for a minute they have given up. Over the past eight years they have been biding their time, implementing agreements and testing new technologies. The BNSF and the BLET agreed to the use of RCO out on the Road in 2007. The CSX and the UTU agreed to “utility conductors” in 2011. Combine these sorts of agreements with new technologies like the “trip advisor” on BNSF that essentially runs the locomotive by itself without a hoghead, and well, you get the picture. The carriers are slowly but surely driving us into a corner from which there may be no escape. Solidarity across craft and union is our only hope because, in this environment, should one union or the other cut a deal to be the “last man standing”, the race to the absolute bottom and the end of the operating crafts as know it will be at hand.

Are you a doubting Thomas? Let’s look back over the past few generations. There have been railroaders who said they would/could never get rid of the fireman GONE. They could/would never get rid of the caboose GONE. That they would never get rid of the brakeman GONE. That they would/could never get rid of the yard engineer GOING, mostly gone. Now we have single employee crews in the yard operating remote control, and very real threats to implementing this technology out on the mainline. If we do not play our cards right, GONE may just be the fate of either the conductor, or the engineer, or perhaps BOTH in the coming generation of railroading.

There is an expression – that the best defense is a good offense. RWU agrees with this outlook. Why sit back and wait for the carriers to decide the date, time and place when they launch this assault on our working lives? Why keep our collective heads in the sand, hoping that the inevitable will not happen if we simply ignore the facts and hope it just goes away? The time is now to begin the dialog, to unite the operating crafts, to involve the membership and devise the strategy necessary to fight this.

Railroad Workers United does not pretend to have all the answers; we certainly do not have the resources to mount this fight alone. But the rail unions of the operating crafts, together with the solidarity from the other craft unions on the railroad along with the broader labor movement and the traveling and the general public can be the coalition that keeps the scourge of single employee crews at bay.

One final point. This is a young rail’s fight. Many of the veteran “old heads” who have lived through the relentless attach upon our dignity, together with the cuts in our wages, benefits and working conditions are demoralized. The will to resist has been beaten out of them by the relentless push by the carriers and the lack of any effective response our union officials over the years. But for all of you engineers and trainmen out there with five or ten years in, who have sacrificed to build a career of railroading, who have come into your own in your chosen profession and have another 10, 20 or 30 years out here, listen up: It’s time to get to your union meeting, it’s time to play an active role, it’s time to raise the whole damn question and it’s time to get organized. Who knows, we may just inspire some of the old heads to join the fight as well.

RWU is ramping up our Campaign Against Single Man Crews. To get involved contact Committee Chair James Wallace at 402-641-5111 or jameswallace715@gmail.com.
Railroad Workers United

Membership Application

Railroad Workers United needs you! If you believe that our unions should fight the carriers and not each other, then RWU is for you. If you believe that the carriers’ “Behavior Based Safety” Programs do more harm to us than good, and if you want real union-based safety committees built upon cross-craft solidarity and rank-and-file control, then RWU is for you. If you want to help reform Railroad Retirement; if you wish to see an active, informed and mobilized union membership -- of all rail labor -- then RWU is for you!

Name _________________________________________________ Date ___________________________

Address ________________________________________________________________________________

City _________________________________________ State __________________ Zip ________________

Phone ___________________________________  Cell Phone ____________________________________

Email Address ____________________________________  Union Position (if any) ____________________

Union __________________________ Local # _____________ Employer ___________________________

Terminal __________________________  Craft __________________________ Years of Service ________

I am a (check one):    ___ Railroad Employee      ___ Railroad Retiree      ___ Railroad Family Member

Please check to affirm this statement:  --- I am not a manager or officer of a rail company.

I’d like to join for (check one):        ___ 1 year $50.00    ___ 2 Years $90.00    ___ 3 Years $120.00

Clip and mail together with your dues to:
Ron Kaminkow, RWU Secretary  P.O. Box 2131  Reno, NV. 89505
OR join on-line at www.railroadworkersunited.org

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T-shirts now available in Black or Gray in S, M, L, XL, 2XL, 3XL, or 4XL. RWU logo at left is on the front of the shirt.

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