

Railroad Crew Transport Drivers Organize with Rails' Help

By Ross Grooters, RWU Steering Committee Member

During the RWU Railroad Safety Conference on September 19th (see article Page 1), I had the opportunity to speak with union crew transport drivers Phil Dedera, President of Local #1177 United Electrical (UE), and Clarence Hill, Chief Steward of the local, at the UE union hall in downtown Chicago, Illinois.

Crew transport plays an integral role in today's railroad operations. You may have stated or heard a co-worker say, "The vans run the railroad." In my experience, over-the-road freight is witnessing an ever-increasing dependence on contracted crew transport. Our safety as railroad workers - particularly in the train and engine craft - when being transported, often during limbo time, is in the hands of railroad crew transport companies and their employees.

Despite numerous fatalities and injuries to both van drivers and railroad employees while being transported, the railroad carriers have done nothing to improve the safety or working conditions experienced by the drivers themselves. Instead, they take a "hands-off" attitude, as if suddenly - despite all the company's cries for safety - they appear uninterested in this crucial aspect of railroad safety.

After years of low pay, few if any benefits, a dangerous environment and mass exploitation, drivers at one of the biggest contractors - Renzenberger - began to organize a union. With the help of the United Electrical (UE) union, they demanded better working conditions. Central to the organizing was support from unionized rail operating employees. With the help of 500 petition signatures from conductors and engineers, they organized about 200 drivers in the Chicago area. In just five years that number has more than quadrupled to about 1,200 members across the country from New Jersey to California.

The van drivers' issues are similar to those of railroaders. "I'm concerned about fatigue," said Phil Dedera, President of Local #1177. Just like railroad workers, drivers experience difficult work schedules, long irregular hours, and chronic fatigue. "Before the union we were forced to get up," said Clarence Hill. Both van drivers (now union representatives), told me: Train crews trust the van drivers, who are often working long



Railroad crews by the thousand are transported daily across the highways of North America under all sorts of conditions, at all hours, 24/7 by contract outfits like Renzenberger. In many cases, the contractor's lone customer is the railroad. The jobs on offer were once in-house with good pay and benefits, eligible for a railroad retirement pension. Now these jobs are typically non-union and low paying. But the workers are fed up now, and they are organizing into the United Electrical (UE) union to change all that.

The two union brothers also discussed the union's efforts at bargaining various benefits, including higher wages and paid time off; safety, including better work/rest cycles; job protection, including a standard contractual provision that would enable management to terminate or otherwise discipline a driver *only* in the event that the company can show - just like on the railroad or at any union shop - "just cause".

By bargaining for a contract which promotes the health and safety of crew transport drivers, these workers and their union are - by extension - preserving and protecting the health and safety of the railroad train crews that they transport. "Protecting drivers' rights keeps skilled people on the job," said Clarence Hill. "Keeping skilled people on the job protects the safety of both van drivers and the railroad employees who are transported." By supporting the efforts of crew van drivers to build the union, railroaders build support to protect our safety and our jobs.

The van drivers understand the importance of solidarity, and have supported Railroad Workers United's efforts against single employee train crews. At the UE's 74th convention this past summer, union members put forth a resolution calling for opposition to single-employee train crews in the interest of protecting worker and public safety and preserving good jobs.

There was a time when railroad crew transport was in fact, a railroad union job. Now it's almost all contracted out work, sometimes creating a layer of separation between van drivers and rail crews. Clarence Hill had this to say about the division, "We're at the bottom of the economic chain, we would like to be appreciated and respected." And as Phil Dedera pointed out the respect goes both ways, "If it wasn't for the 500 conductors and engineers [who signed our petition] we might never have got our contract. We're grateful."

