

# ***RWU Sponsors Third Rail Safety Conference in Chicago***

*By Gifford Hartman, RWU Solidarity Member*

In his 1914 poem, “Chicago,” Carl Sandburg called the city a “Player with Railroads and the Nation’s Freight Handler.” Others have called it the “Rome of Railroads,” as in *all railroads lead to Chicago*. It’s the biggest, busiest and most complex rail hub in the world, with 1,300 passenger and freight trains passing through it daily. It remains the central node of the North American rail transportation system. So Chicago couldn’t have been more fitting for RWU’s third Rail Safety Conference.

The conference, titled “Railroad Safety: Workers, Community & the Environment”, carried on the agenda of the previous two conferences in California and Washington State with around 80 in attendance. Carl Rosen, Western Region President of the United Electrical workers (UE), gave us a warm welcome to the hall. Afterwards, RWU General Secretary Ron Kaminkow gave a brief history of RWU and mentioned the recent defeat of a union Tentative Agreement for single-person crews at BNSF. Conference attendees introduced themselves. While the vast majority were from the Chicagoland area, some had traveled far, with a few from both coasts as well as Canada. Each cluster of table groups came up with their goals for the conference. Most concerned educating affected communities about the realities of fossil fuel transport, especially rail, as well as upholding the principle of keeping energy resources “in the ground.” Next RWU members gave two sessions about the safety concerns of railroad workers. Included in the first were Single Employee Train Crews, Teamwork, Chronic Fatigue and Scheduling. In the second they were Long & Heavy Trains, Track Maintenance, and Rail Safety Programs. A guest, Michael Termini from the Government Accountability Project, talked about legal protections for whistleblowers.

After lunch I facilitated the Supply Chain Inquiry Workshop, the intention of which is to model how cross-sectoral solidarity *might* follow the entire energy commodity chain, from the extraction fields of fracked crude oil all the way to the East Coast’s largest refinery in Philadelphia – passing through Chicago if transported by rail. After showing some maps of the routes, participants gathered in five breakout groups by sector: oil extraction/pipeline workers, truckers, railroad workers at both BSNF and CSX, and refinery workers. The workshop activity was based on a hypothetical strike of Philly refinery workers and how the other sectors of the supply chain workforce could support it. From the nationwide USW refinery workers strike earlier in 2015, the demands were the same. The refinery workers strike demands – *real* in the USW strike earlier this year and *imagined* in this workshop – are identical to the safety concerns of railroad workers. They’re actually identical to most industrial workers the world over. The best slogan coming out of the workshop was from an RWU member who stated, “Your strike is *our* strike!”

The next workshop was “Chicago Area Organizing Efforts & Community Mapping.” Chicago activists guided us through the concerns regarding crude oil trains, that are destined either for Chicago or pass through on their way east, and how community members can join an interactive mapping process. It finished with a hands-on activity with some supersize maps and markers for participants to add data to them.

The final workshop almost served as a basic conference wrap-up: “Building the Labor-Community Alliance”. Paul Bigman from Seattle walked us through the process of finding allies to support our struggles, listening to their concerns, and building further solidarity to strengthen our struggles. His examples of success of environmental activists finding common cause with industrial workers was truly inspiring.

The workshops ended with Affinity Clusters, where people broke into three groups to attempt to build lasting networks to continue working together into the future. The three were Supply Chains, Chicagoland Issues, and Global Issues. In the latter, participants discussed the support work for railroad workers Tom Harding and Richard Labrie who are defendants for the oil train disaster in Lac-Mégantic in Quebec, Canada.

We finished the day with a spirited singing of *Solidarity Forever*, before 30 of us continued meeting and discussing over dinner in Greektown for a sumptuous feast.

The following day, 25 of us took part in a guided tour of the railroad infrastructure around the south side of Chicagoland, visiting Blue Island Junction, and the yards of Indiana Harbor Belt, CSX, and Union Pacific, then going by the BP Whiting Refinery and the KCBX Terminal where pet coke is collected for trans-shipment around the world.

This tour just scratched the surface of the complexity of Chicagoland’s logistics infrastructure, but in many ways was a perfect overview of the massive scale of this central node of the North America transportation system. Just as with the Rail Safety Conference the previous day, the experience left me better educated about how fossil fuels – and other commodities – traverse Chicago’s immense rail transportation network. More importantly, it showed how we all live along supply chains and how our safety is fully dependent on the safety of the workers up and down the line. Acting in solidarity unites us because their safety is our safety; their struggle is our struggle.



*A group of participants take a break during the Chicago conference*