

Struggle on the W&LE Enters Next Phase

This spring, in response to the news that the trainman and engineers on the Wheeling & Lake Erie (W&LE) might resume strike activity, Railroad Workers United (RWU) engaged in a mini-fundraiser on behalf of those besieged brothers and their ongoing struggle against single employee train crews. With a very limited effort – and no strike activity to date from the workers – within a few short weeks RWU was able to passively raise \$831.39, exceeding the target of \$700.00.

In September 2013, W&LE engineers and trainmen struck this Midwest regional carrier when the company began running some trains without a conductor, a practice which the union said was a violation of the agreement and which constituted a “major dispute” under the Railway Labor Act (RLA). The carrier of course disagreed, sought and won a federal judge’s temporary restraining order (TRO) within 24 hours, and the employees were ordered back to work. From that day until April 24th, 2015 they were barred from striking by the same judge’s injunction. But on that date, a unanimous three-judge panel of the Sixth Circuit ruled in the workers’ favor, stating that the issue was in fact a major dispute, and released the workers to strike again should they elect to do so.

Upon learning the news, RWU Co-Chair John “J.P.” Wright immediately discussed the matter with officials of BLET #292, the union that represents both trainmen and engineers and offered financial assistance from RWU, its members and supporters network. Within hours, RWU launched a “crowd sourcing” online campaign that began to raise funds. “The results of what really was a low intensity effort shows the solidarity and support that other rails are willing to lend when called upon in such a time of need,” stated Brother J.P. He went on to point out that if and when the strike is actually resumed once again, that with an all-out high intensity effort waged by

RWU – with all of rail labor joining in – tens of thousands of dollars needed to sustain the strikers could be garnered very quickly. “This really was sort of a trial run. When and if these fellow workers resume their strike against single employee operations, RWU is pledged to mobilize whatever resources are at our disposal – financially and otherwise – to help them win. And we urge the trade unions – particularly the BLET and SMART-TD to mobilize their far vaster resources and to do the same.”

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While a workers victory on the W&LE should be of keen interest to the BLET National Division, Brother J.P. notes that it should also be of concern to the SMART-TD. “While these fellow workers happen to be members of the BLET, in some ways their fight is even more the concern of the SMART-TD. If the W&LE were to get its way and win this fight, SMART-TD represented trainmen along with the union as a whole have as much to lose – if not a lot more – than the BLET!”

The W&LE trainmen and engineers have gone without a contract for seven long years now. The carrier is attempting to starve them into submission and accept a contract that – while allowing a much needed and deserved raise in pay – would have them working alone all day. Their future is uncertain. It is not clear if and when the strike will resume. But one thing is for sure: every trainman and engineer, in fact every railroader of every craft needs to stand at the ready to aid, abet and assist – financially and otherwise – these embattled union brothers when called upon. *Solidarity forever!*