

## Opinion & Commentary

### ***The Concessionary Landscape: How Did We Get Here?***

In the first two Commentaries of this series we discussed concessions past, present and future. Now, the discussion will shift towards addressing the following questions: How have the carriers effortlessly succeeded over the years in the following: 1) driving down our real wages, relative to the cost-of-living while simultaneously achieving major increases in productivity; 2) getting away with operating a more dangerous work environment that puts us and the public at greater risk; and 3) compromising our dignity, not only on the job, but our quality of life off the job as well?

A critical component of this discussion will be to take an objective, critical look at the role played by the leadership of our unions, as well as the federal government, in driving us down to our current situation. The short explanation can be broken down into four basic elements:

1) The impact of the *direct* intervention of the federal government cannot be overstated. While there have been numerous regional and local disputes where the federal government has intervened, I'll highlight the three major national disputes we have been involved in during my career, going back to 1974.

After three days of the 1982 nationwide BLE strike, we were ordered back to work by President Reagan. A Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) was established to draft a proposed contractual agreement. The proposed "agreement" was then rammed down our throats by the House of Representatives and the Senate, both voting in favor of this wretched concessionary "agreement" by overwhelming majorities of approximately 9-to-1. Reagan's signature was a foregone conclusion; a token formality.

The 1991 national BLE strike pretty much followed the same script with two exceptions: a) it was under the reign of President George H.W. Bush, and b) we were only allowed to have a fleeting taste of our potential power for all of 19 hours. And then in 2011, President Obama, friend to all labor bureaucrats, wouldn't even let us taste a "drop" of our potential power, putting the PEB wheels in motion a few hours before we were due to hit the picket lines. This time, the BLE leadership encouraged its membership to simply approve and accept the PEB's recommendations.

My own opinion is that it might have been a tad bit embarrassing for the BLET leadership to have all of our so-called "friends" of labor, mainly Democratic Party politicians, including President Obama, get their hands dirty by ramming another contract down our throats against our will.

2) From *direct* government intervention flows *indirect* government intervention, or what I like to refer to as the "gun to the head" threat of a PEB. Stop me if you've heard this before: "Well boys and girls, this contract proposal we are submitting to you for your approval is not as favorable as

we would have preferred, but this is as good as it's going to get. We *strongly* recommend that you vote for and approve this tentative agreement because we don't want to roll the dice with a 'third party' settling our contract."

3) Historically, the rail bosses have been masters at playing "divide & conquer". It's bad enough that we are fragmented into a dozen-plus different craft unions. At contract time, as soon as one union settles, that agreement becomes the "bar" for the rest of us. On top of that, we are divided carrier by carrier. The concept of a national standard of wages, work rules and conditions has been obliterated. Individual carrier agreements are becoming increasingly the norm, from major Class I's like the CN, to all the regional "short lines". Then within each individual carrier, we see more and more individual terminal agreements. With each and every individual terminal, carrier and/or union agreement, the "bar" is lowered and then inevitably used as a club to beat the rest of us into submission down the road.



4) As if they don't already have enough weapons in their arsenal to batter us, occasionally, when they must be in a depraved state of boredom, to amuse themselves at our expense, they will throw the proverbial "bone" to a certain demographic to get a concessionary contract through. Throw a "bone" to the yard workers while shafting the road workers, and vice versa. Speed up the rate of wage progression for younger workers while including work rule changes that they are not seasoned enough to grasp the impact of. By the time they do, the deal is done.

In the next issue of [The Highball](#), I'll go into a more in-depth analysis on how the perspectives of the leadership of our unions, and the strategies that flow from them has contributed to our predicament. Until then, I strongly recommend that you go to the RWU website and look up "[You Railroad Men](#)" by Eugene V. Debs. This should be required reading for every rail worker. We should have classes in our union meetings to discuss its meaning and relevance for us *today*. We should be required to take a "must-pass-with- 85%" biannual exam on this document. Check it out! (See RWU Home Page-RWU Blog-Blog Spot -2012-November).

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