

What Drives the Rail Carriers' Relentless Aggression?

The Fall 2012 issue of *The Highball* is when RWU first gave me the honor and privilege of venting thirty + years of accumulated anger and indignation inspired by working for the railroad since 1974. My therapist is convinced that being able to utilize this paper "soapbox" for a cathartic stream of consciousness ranting and raging every three months has done wonders for my blood boiling hatred of the ruling class (especially toward the railroad "robber barons", past and present) and has helped me to control any anger management issues that may flow from all of the above. With my first article back in 2012 "Attention All Rails: Beware the Carriers' Section 6 Notices", I attempted to analyze the carriers' 2009 wish list and pose the stakes involved for us.

Now that the National Carriers Conference Committee (the coalition of most Class 1's and many regional and short line railroads) has issued their 2014 Section 6 Notice, this is as good a time as any to pick up where the last one left off.

While this new edition of their ultimate fantasy wish list is pretty much the same verbiage as the last ten years, over the course of the past year they have decisively ramped up their aggressive determination to make their dreams come true. The most significant manifestations of this include, but are not limited to: 1) The Wheeling and Lake Erie forcing its BLE-T represented engineers and conductors on strike, demanding they submit to engineer only operations after seven years without a raise. 2) The attempt by the BNSF, in shameless collaboration with elements of the SMART-TD leadership, to entice conductors to sell their souls (and their jobs) for an engineer only agreement. 3) The CP (US) attempt to bribe us with a blood money for anything-goes free-for-all agreement, which would further compromise safety, trashing our dignity and what's left of any quality of life. 4) Then CP forced our Canadian brothers and sisters in the operating crafts to go on strike over the same issues before the TCRC leadership surrendered to binding arbitration.

What drives this intensified aggression? I'll let the carriers answer that in their own words with the lead paragraph from their 2014 Section 6 Notice (editorial comments in brackets are mine): "America's freight railroads have combined innovation, enormous capital investments, a commitment to customer service, and a talented [that's right] and highly compensated [not enough for what we endure and sacrifice] work force to forge and sustain a vibrant industry. The railroads must continue to make responsible decisions and investments so that we can safely [give them credit for saying that with a straight face], efficiently and consistently meet and exceed customer expectations. Our success in the marketplace is essential to attracting investors, facilitating industry growth and stability, and providing long term career opportunities to our employees."

From the 2009 Section 6 Notice: Referring to the "...tens of billions of dollars..." needed to maintain and expand the infrastructure, "The funds needed for those massive capital investments will not flow into the industry, however, unless railroads consistently deliver excellent financial results. In-

vestors demand competitive returns, and will take their money elsewhere if we cannot meet their expectations."

I completely agree with these assessments by the carriers. Whoa, I can hear some of you howling, "Hey! Whose side are you on?!" Fair enough, please allow me to explain.

Under the present economic and political realities the above paragraphs accurately describe how the world turns, at least in our neck of the woods. Over the years many co-workers and union officials have observed, "The railroads are making record profits so we should get a nice raise." The problem is that under capitalism, the rate of profit/return on investments is *never* enough. Example: Let's say the railroad pays investors a 10% profit on their investment but Acme Corporation is paying 15%. Seeking the highest rate of return the investors will put their money into Acme Corp. until Brand X Enterprise offers a 20% return. So it goes and so it goes and so it goes... etc. In order to compete with Brand X for the investors' money, the railroads must increase their rate of profit. What the carriers have to pay for locomotives, fuel, rail etc. is pretty much set by the market. There is not much flexibility in their overhead. The one "commodity" necessary to operate that the carriers *do* have flexibility with is what they compensate us for our labor power. This explains their never ending *relentless* quest to squeeze us to the bone, maximizing productivity out of the least amount of workers. Overtime is more cost effective than paying benefits to "excess" employees, in spite of the costs of insurance premiums, deductibles and co-pays.

So as a direct result of all this, my conductors now routinely ride mile long shoves, hanging on for dear life, on ergonomically challenged auto racks – at times in minus 30 degree wind chills and/or blizzard conditions – because the carrier has eliminated all the utility positions. By intensifying the work and flagrantly violating our agreements. The Canadian Pacific has posted record revenues and earnings, a record low operating ratio, and a stock share price that has *more than tripled!* The CEO of CP, E Hunter Harrison was recently awarded "Railroader of the Year" by Railway Age. He pulled in a cool \$17.8 million last year. Isn't *that* special?! Is it any wonder I've been a an angry "young" man since I first began to comprehend the concept of injustice in all its many forms?

The bosses' and the bureaucrats' mantra is: "That's the way it is, kid...always has been & always will be." To the angry "young" men & women out there who don't accept what happens in our workplace, our communities and the world around us, RWU welcomes & needs you to join us on this battlefield in the universal struggle for social justice.

To be continued...

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