

## ***We Railroad Workers Must Set the Terms of Engagement***

Do we settle for what the carriers are willing to give us when it comes to our safety, dignity and quality of life; or do we organize ourselves, to empower ourselves to demand that which we as workers, much less human beings, are entitled to? This is the question that I posed at the end of my commentary in the previous issue of *The Highball* (see Spring 2014, "The Rail Carriers' Attacks; the Unions' Response; and RWU").

I submit that in the forty years that I've been railroading, we have essentially been reduced to settling for whatever the carriers are gracious enough to give us. In this series of commentaries that began with the Fall 2012 issue of this newsletter, I have attempted to tell the story of the decline and degeneration of our working conditions over the last thirty plus years, as well as to analyze how and why this has been accomplished. (For those new to *The Highball*, past issues are available at our website [www.railroadworkersunited.org](http://www.railroadworkersunited.org)).

"What can we do now?" has become a common question among a growing layer of railworkers around the country. RWU does not claim to have all the answers. There is no quick fix to the state we are in. We are up against powerful adversaries in the carriers and the government. Both Democratic and Republican politicians alike virtually rubber stamp the corporate agenda when we, through our unions, refuse to bow down.

The concept of one national agreement for railworkers has been obliterated with more and more "On Property" agreements. When the leadership of the rail unions allowed the unions to be busted at the Florida East Coast Railway in the mid 1960's, that crushing blow laid the groundwork for the state of fragmentation that exists today along with the proliferation of non-union "short lines".

Speaking of fragmentation, to the vast majority of railworkers, it is obvious that being split up into thirteen different craft unions instead of all railworkers being organized into one industrial union, severely weakens our ability to resist the carriers' attacks. Railworkers are the poster children for the concept of "divide and conquer".

To their credit, the BLE-T home page prominently features a link to the Teamster Nation blog: "Get the latest update in the War on Workers". By logical extension those waging "war" on us can fairly be qualified as the "enemy". With that in mind, the Railway Labor Act (RLA) gives the carriers the right to flagrantly violate our contracts and agreements, then dictate to us how we can defend ourselves. "Do as your told, file your grievance later." They attempt to dictate how we fight for safety with the union backed Behavior Based Safety Committees. In essence, the "enemy" dictates to us what "weapons" we are allowed to use to defend ourselves from their "assault" on us. Establishing these exponentially disproportionate lopsided terms of engagement would not have been such a walk in the park without the unconditional acceptance of these terms by the national leadership of our unions over the preceding decades up to the present.

At Canadian Pacific, the management has made tremendous progress in virtually imposing a significant portion of Canadian National style (U.S.) working conditions in advance of the negotiations in an attempt to "sell" the agreement they are determined to ram down our throats.

The atmosphere feels like a combination of a slave plantation and an industrial prison camp. There is already a rumbling of, "How can we fight this when they are already having their way with us? We might as well take the big payoff when it officially is on the table." The more prominent discussion is, "How can the unions allow this to happen?" My answer to that is simple. When you unconditionally allow the "enemy" to dictate the terms of engagement, what do you expect?

From the box at the bottom of page two of this issue of The Highball, where we summarize what Railroad Workers United is about: "We are carrying on a tradition of rank- and-file activity which dates back to the 1890's and the time of Eugene v. Debs." Our website has more on the legacy of Debs, his significance and relevance for us today. A quick reference can be found in two articles in the Summer 2013 issue of The Highball, "Rail Labor and Management: Our Interests are Diametrically Opposed" and "The Crisis of Leadership in Our Rail Unions - Part 1". Not only did Debs attempt to educate and inspire the working class, but most importantly he challenged the workers to study, learn and think for themselves about the relations between big business, the government and labor.

So what can we do now? The situation cries for some kind of defensive response. Conquering an understanding of what drives the carriers' agenda and how they effortlessly impose it, combined with collectively empowering ourselves with the concept of entitlement, is necessary before we can successfully organize resistance. RWU strives to contribute to this long overdue process.