

Opinion & Commentary

The Rail Carriers' Attacks; the Unions' Response; and RWU

Coming out of RWU's 4th Biennial Convention (see article, page 4), those of us who attended left the Chicago event: both inspired by the fragmented but significant pockets of resistance in the labor movement, in this country as well as internationally; as well as challenged by our struggles as rail workers in North America.

In the context of the attacks on our safety, dignity, quality of life on and off the job that we *already* face, as well as the future attacks we know are being prepared, several questions are posed for us as an organization of rank-and-file rail workers who refuse to just roll over and accept these attacks without a fight.

What are RWU's short term objectives? Long term objectives? What role can we, do we see ourselves playing within our present union structures? What kind of tactics and/or strategies can we attempt to advance our objectives?

A common discussion that gets posed by coworkers who like what we are saying and doing, goes something like, "I like your newsletter, your articles are informative *but what can we do now?* Good question. I will attempt to address these questions, as well as common criticisms of RWU in this and future articles and commentaries, as my contribution to this necessary ongoing discussion.

What kind of relations with our existing unions and their respective leaderships does RWU aspire to? Recently, a member of RWU's Steering Committee had a discussion with a high ranking BLE-T officer. When asked his opinion of RWU, his response was that we focused too much on negativity and that the way to make our unions stronger is to work "within the system".

Though RWU has major disagreements with the leadership of our unions over fundamental questions of perspectives, strategies and tactics, we have no interest in public confrontations with them. We strive to keep our focus on the rail carriers and the government, while being brutally honest about the role of our unions. As rail workers who bear the brunt of the carriers' attacks on us, in real time, in the real world, we have a right, obligation and responsibility to advance the discussion on 1) What's wrong with this picture? and 2) What needs to happen in order to more effectively defend ourselves? In the course of this discussion, RWU does not apologize for being respectfully, constructively critical of the response by our unions to 1) the carriers' attacks on us, the workers and 2) the hazards and dangers posed to surrounding communities by the carriers' unsafe operating practices. If fundamental differences did not exist, there would be no need for us to invest our time, energy and money into RWU, much less for RWU to even exist.

I'm going to reference an article from the UTU website, posted June 21, 2013, "Stem Testifies on Safety Before Senate Committee". On June 19, 2013, UTU National Legislative Director James Stem appeared before the US Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation. Among several issues raised, Stem advocated for "... improving work schedules and employee notification." This is in reference to the "extra board" where we are subject to 24-hour on-call status, mandated to report for work on two hours notice. Stem offered the following suggestions to address this issue: "Providing employees a regular start time so they know days in advance when they must come to work ... Employees with regular start times are not the employees who are dying in fatigue-related collisions."

It is not my intent to take issue with Brother Stem. I applaud him for pointing out that this barbaric work schedule, which in my opinion should never have been allowed to be implemented, is responsible for fatigue-related collisions that kill and maim us. He is doing the best he can in the existing framework.

It is RWU's contention that this entire framework is structured to aid the carriers and reduce us to begging for whatever relief we can attain. RWU does not accept even *one worker* being sacrificed at the altar of the carriers' greed and profit margin. We do not accept being reduced to begging the "master" to please stop "whipping" us so hard, only to be told that the "beatings" will continue until morale improves. If the carriers insist on remaining intransigent when it comes to our safety, our very lives as workers as well as those in surrounding communities, because they can, then have we not earned the moral and ethical right to organize ourselves to take the "whip" out of their hands?

Do we settle for what the carriers are willing to give us, when it comes to safety, dignity and quality of life, or do we organize ourselves, to empower ourselves to *demand* that which we as workers and human beings are entitled to? RWU votes for the latter scenario.

In one sentence, this is what we are advocating for and why we exist.

To be continued....

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