

Opinion & Commentary

The Crisis of Leadership in Our Rail Unions - Part 2

Do the perspectives of the leadership of our unions, and the strategies and tactics that flow from those perspectives, advance our interests in the struggle for a safe work environment, respect, dignity and quality of life on and off the job?

One of the fundamental reasons RWU came into existence was that a layer of rank and file rail workers understood the urgent necessity of posing this and other basic questions to our brothers and sisters across the continent, hoping to ignite a broader discussion. What's wrong with the present picture? How have we ended up here? Why is it that our leadership talks about fighting for our interests while we know that the reality for us on the ground is deteriorating rapidly by the day? How can the widening disconnect between us and our present union leadership be explained and challenged?

In the first article in this series (see the Fall 2012 issue of *The Highball*: "Beware the Carriers' Section 6 Notices"). I explained the significance of these Section 6 notices as a preview of our not too distant future.

The November 2009 Section 6 notice opened up with the carriers singing the usual financial blues. In addition to making reference to the economic turmoil in full swing at that time, they expressed their customary concerns about the "legal and economic regulatory environment" as well as future expenditures. "Recent legislative mandates like Positive Train Control and new locomotive emissions controls will require massive additional investments in the coming years." They went on to say, "To meet increased demands for rail freight service, the industry will need to invest tens of billions of dollars in new track, signals, bridges, tunnels, and service facilities. The funds needed for those massive capital investments will not flow into the industry, however, unless railroads consistently deliver excellent financial results. Investors demand competitive returns, and will take their money elsewhere if we cannot meet their expectations." In other words, the carriers need US to work harder, run faster and jump higher for the least compensation they can get away with, in order to maximize THEIR rate of profit, so they can entice more money from investors to play with.

Truth be told, that is essentially how capitalism, the profit system functions. This will be the subject of a future commentary. When the UTU reached a tentative agreement with the carriers in 2011, there was the usual "righteous indignation" from other rail union leaders, rightfully so, that this tentative agreement would set the bar for the rest of rail labor. Many UTU members were not impressed with this tentative agreement either.

With the UTU on the defensive from other unions as well

as from within, they had a former UTU Associate General Counsel Dan Elliot, then chairman of the US Surface Transportation Board, address more than 500 officers and members at their eastern Regional Conference in New York City on July 4, 2011.

From the UTU website, posted July 5, 2011, came this headline: "STB chairman: T & E workers 'unsung heroes'": The article noted that, "Elliot cautioned that while railroads are posting record profits, major railroads remain revenue inadequate – earning less on their invested capital than is required by the marketplace to attract new investment for long-term renewal of track, signals, and equipment. The STB's most recent determination for calendar year 2009, found not a single railroad to be revenue adequate. His point, recognized by contract negotiators in the room, is that while rail profitability is impressive and improving, it is unlikely a presidential emergency board or Congress would conclude that railroads can afford more than the voluntary national contract settlement pending UTU rank-and-file ratification".

So here we have the UTU, the biggest rail union in the U.S., inviting a government official to address its membership, to plead the carriers' case for "revenue adequacy", in order to motivate for ratification of the tentative agreement on the table at that time. With apologies to the Joker, Riddle me this Batman: How can our union leadership effectively defend us from the carriers' assault on our safety, dignity, respect, quality of life on and off the job, when they are essentially re-stating the carriers' justification for this assault? *To be continued ...*

For further reading on the issues raised here, please see the following: 1) The UTU website posted October 5, 2011, '*Rail revenue adequacy faces challenge, stocks down*' is a very instructive primer on this subject that we will no doubt be hearing more of; and 2) The RWU website, under RWU Campaigns, the *Coordinated Bargaining* link takes you to articles, our resolution and leaflet advocating for "One Big Labor Coalition" of rail unions to implement a national strategy of coordinated bargaining.

In the next issue of *The Highball* I'll expand on these issues, including the BLET's posturing leading up to the 2011 "strike" (that was never going to happen).

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