

Opinion & Commentary

Signs of Life from the Rank & File: Now Let's Build a Movement!

In the previous issue of *The Highball* (Fall 2014), I summarized the worst of the sordid details in the “blood money for anything goes” Tentative Agreement (TA) that was then on the table at Canadian Pacific (CP) Railway (US) (See “*Don't be Fooled by Candy-Coated Promises: Fight Back*”). With utmost pride in and appreciation for my co-workers at CP, I am pleased to report this alarming contract proposal was *overwhelmingly* rejected 333-13 (that's not a typo!). By a 30-1 margin, my brothers and sisters in the SMART-Transportation Division (TD) served notice to CP management, in no uncertain terms, that our dignity, self-respect and safety for us as workers as well as the community in general, are NOT FOR SALE!!! A few weeks prior to this development, BNSF workers in the SMART-TD GO-001 sent the same memo to management by decisively rejecting the infamous single employee train crew TA by a vote of 3,056 against to just 623 in favor, a remarkable 5-1 margin.

In my 40+ years of railroading, I've never seen TA's rejected by such disproportionate margins. I think it's safe to say that the disconnect between us — the rank and file workers and our union leaderships — has reached unprecedented epic proportions. While the mission statements of our unions and the rhetoric of our leaders is about fighting for our interests as workers, as well as those of the public, we are voting with our feet that the deeds fall *far* short of the words. While this new feeling of collective empowerment is profoundly inspiring, a fundamental question posed is: *Where do we go with all of this?*

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Before I express my personal opinion on this, a qualification might be in order. Though RWU is obviously critical of most policies, strategies and tactics of our union leaders, we *try* to avoid a confrontational tone. Considering what we face on the job in our day-to-day reality, combined with the jaw dropping TA's slithering from the “top-secret” backrooms out into the wide open, that's not always easy. Sometimes we are human and our gut feelings in the moment may slightly override our striving for tact and diplomacy. So I'll clarify that we are not *anti*-leadership, but we are *pro*-rank and file democracy, involvement, action and ultimately control of OUR unions.

We hear the not so subtle sniping by some that RWU is just a bunch of disgruntled “crybabies” on the sideline. In the spirit of democracy we assert our right to criticize the perspectives of our leadership while advocating for common ground where we can fight together shoulder to shoulder.

From our inception the starting point for RWU, as well as the very reason we exist today, can be summarized as: Something is VERY wrong with this “picture”. The relationship between our unions vs. the carriers simply is not working for us. Individual union leaders, officers, Presidents, General Chairmen, etc. in the present are not the problem. They are simply implementing the same tired old perspectives in place for decades, handed down like a torch from each preceding generation of leadership to the next. In with the “outs”, out with the “ins”, the names and faces change while the policies, tactics and strategies remain the same. RWU advocates for a fundamental change in perspectives, summarized on page 2 in our *Statement of Principles* (SoP) bullet points. Please refer to our website for the complete text.

Prior to the onset of rate deregulation that began in the early 80's under Reagan, the carriers were able to pass the cost of our comparatively civilized working conditions back then on to the customer. Deregulation compelled the carriers to aggressively reduce their labor costs. In response to the carriers' assault on our jobs, dignity, self-respect and safety, the unions' perspective of cooperation, collaboration with and subservience to them has proven to be disastrous for us. Giving the union leadership the benefit of the doubt, that while they may mean well, the indisputable fact is that our road to hell is being paved by their self-proclaimed righteous intentions.

The starting point of wisdom is not only for us to recognize that the system in place is not working, but more importantly to ask and discuss amongst ourselves *why* is it not working? *What* kind of changes do we need? *How* do we make this happen? There is no quick fix or easy answer but as the carriers go for our “jugular vein” the need for us to discuss and debate these critical questions is more urgent than ever. We can do this in the spirit of unity and solidarity, with civility and respect for each other, as well as opposing views, especially those considered to be outside the mainstream if not outright controversial. Let's take this discussion deeper into our shanties, break rooms, locomotive cabs, crew vans, bars, dens, union meetings, regional meetings and ultimately to the floor of our national conventions.

We encourage ALL rails who agree with our SoP to join RWU, but a special shout out to the workers at BNSF and CP Rail, whose actions hopefully herald the beginning of a new era where we no longer just take what the carriers are gracious enough to give us. Let's build on this momentum, take it to the next level, transform ourselves as we build a mass movement of educated, organized, mobilized workers determined to fight by any means necessary for that which we are entitled to.

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