

Building the Labor - Community Alliance: A Window of Opportunity for Rails

Events of recent months have presented railroad workers and their organizations with an unprecedented window of opportunity. The surprising number of high profile derailments, explosions and collisions has riveted the public's attention on the railroad in a way that has not been seen in decades. Citizens groups are up in arms about the potential dangers of oil trains that are rolling with ever greater frequency through their communities. Environmentalists are aghast at what disaster might strike if and when the next oil train derails in some pristine or protected watershed. Shippers have been outraged over poor service of late. Senators are outraged at commuter train wrecks and loss of life that they say should never have happened. And even the FRA's new acting Administrator is (rhetorically at least) getting into the act.

All this public attention on the railroad makes for a golden opportunity for us as railroad workers to tell our story. The public is ready, willing and able to hear it like never before. Single employee operations of trains; chronic train crew fatigue; excessively long and heavy trains; draconian attendance and disciplinary policies; poor train prediction lineups; improper maintenance; harassment and retaliation for reporting workplace injuries and safety failures. All these issues and more — our issues — are all of a sudden, now issues of grave concern for the public as well.

RWU has grabbed a tiger by the tail and has made the first

effort to channel this public concern and outrage into a progressive direction. Our first attempts to "bring railroading to the people" in Richmond, CA and Olympia, WA have been well received. The general public is hungry for information and ready to stand with us railroaders in our struggles with the rail carriers. Many were shocked and outraged at what they heard at the conferences, and pledged their unwavering solidarity with us.

Never during either conference did we hear even one person speak against trains or the railroad. If anything, those in attendance were more pro-rail than the average citizen. But just like railroad workers, they have a vital interest in trains moving goods and people as efficiently, safely, and sustainably as possible. *To be critical of the rail carriers is not necessarily to be critical of trains nor the railroad!*

The emerging labor—community alliance is just getting started. We are pulling out of the station onto the mainline brothers and sisters. We have the highball. Let's make a run with this thing and see where it takes us. Everyone of you rails - working and retired - can play a role in building this movement. Talk to your friends and neighbors, address your local civic group, join a community or environmental organization and help spread the word, organize a conference like the ones described on Page 4 & 5. RWU can help. Contact us and climb aboard. We need you!