

Preparing for the Rail Industry's Counter Attack on Single Employee Crews

Last September, railroad workers won one. By an overwhelming margin, trainmen on the BNSF defeated a tentative agreement (TA) that would have decimated their ranks and provided the BNSF the ability to operate over the road trains with a lone employee. Had the TA been approved, the dominoes would no doubt have quickly fallen, and within a few years, the major rail carriers would likely have achieved their long awaited goal of single employee train crew operations.

The rail industry (and certain segments of the union officialdom) was shocked and a bit embarrassed by the level of militancy and determination by the rank & file, and the lopsided vote tally (80% voted NO). The BNSF, the rail industry and its mouthpieces were largely muted for the next six months. But the carriers will lick their wounds, regroup, and go on the offensive once again. In March, we got a glimpse of what their strategy may – at least partially – consist of, when the BNSF announced its intention to use drone technology to inspect its property and trains. Not missing a beat, industry mouthpiece *Railway Age* insinuated that the use of drone and “remote” technology just might be the industry’s ultimate weapon to render our labor superfluous and to beat us into submission.

Obviously, the fight over single employee train crews is far from over. But while the carriers have their battle plans, we have ours. We are taking this fight to the people, to county fairs, festivals, to the community and to the streets. Our recent experience organizing conferences on the west coast has

revealed to us the depth and breadth of a burgeoning community and environmental movement deeply concerned with railroad safety, one that is open to our message – not just on the single employee crew issue - but for an end to chronic fatigue, excessively long and heavy trains and all the rest.

Building up this alliance with the community is a two-way street. Railroad workers need to come out of the shadows and into the light of day. Show your support for community and environmental efforts. Go to a demonstration for clean air and clean water with a picket signs that reads: “Another Railroad Worker for a Better Environment”. Join an organization in your community that is concerned about oil trains and derailments, blocked crossings, and other rail related issues.

Finally, demand that your union leaders get involved. Imagine the possibilities, if our unions - with their vast financial and logistical resources - threw their weight into this fight. RWU just pulled off two conferences that drew 225 participants from a diverse group of labor and community activists. Citizens are aroused like never before around issues of rail safety. Railroad workers have felt their power in voting down the now infamous single crew deal on BNSF. Let’s come together and build this labor-community alliance. Let’s put the carriers on notice that they will not win this war. That railroad workers and American citizens alike are fired up and we are going to win this one. Together, a coalition of labor, community, and the environment is invincible. We will prevail!