

Drastic Times Call for Labor to Once Again Take “Industrial Action”

More than 35 years ago, the Reagan administration declared war on the labor movement in the U.S. firing the air traffic controllers, sending the signal that it was open season on workers and their organizations. Many an “old-head” railroader has been known to quip: “We should have shut the country down” and defended not just the Controllers, but all of us. Well, we did not, and our wages, benefits and working conditions – and the labor movement – have been on the downslide ever since.

So, what will we as workers – and as railroad workers specifically – do this time around? After three or four decades of decline, defeat and demoralization, we most definitely have our work cut out for us. So when we do mount an opposition to those in government and industry who would destroy us, we must seek out and develop creative tactics. And while we certainly must look to the future for these innovative tools to win with, we must also look back and remember the basics – like the strike – that built the labor movement and allowed the way forward for working people to begin with.

So just what do we expect to be coming our way? Let’s take a look at what the carriers and the government might have in store for us in the coming months and years.

Bargaining: No sooner had election results been announced and the carriers were drooling, rubbing their hands in glee. They fully expect our defeat at the bargaining table, and have refused to bargain in good faith. National handling has ground to a halt. The same is true at Amtrak. The carriers are intent on playing hardball, confident that they can stick it to the unions with a lousy contract and a PEB to their liking, if it comes to it.

Single Employee Crews: The FRA failed to issue a final rule on train crew staffing. Given the agency’s feeble draft attempt last March, and the incoming Trump administration’s rhetoric against “government regulation”, it is unlikely we will win anything here. The carriers are emboldened in their drive to run trains with single crews given the outcome of the elections.

Railroad Retirement: House Speaker Paul Ryan has made no secret – prior to his assumption of the Speakership - of his hostility to the railroad retirement system and his goal to dismantle what is one of rail workers’ most cherished benefits. Now as House Speaker, with colleague Mitch McConnell as the Senate Majority Leader and with Trump in the White House, we would be wise to prepare for a full-frontal assault here.

FELA: The Federal Employers Liability Act has been around since 1908, assisting railroad workers in our fight for a safer workplace, penalizing the carrier when one of us is injured or killed on the job. The carriers have wished to reform or eliminate FELA, but have not had the chance. Given the current situation, they may mount an offensive to repeal this piece of “government regulation” and “interference” in business.

Amtrak: The leadership of all three branches of government has expressed their contempt for Amtrak. Despite his calls for infrastructure investment and high speed rail, Trump’s rhetoric does not necessarily translate into support for a quasi-public transportation system, or any form of public transit. Amtrak’s long distance trains may be in grave danger, and the company’s existence might well be in jeopardy.

Union Shop: In recent decades, the Republican party has made clear their opposition to unions and the union shop. Where

The GOP has gained control of state legislatures in Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan and elsewhere, they have pushed their agenda to eliminate the union/agency shop and degrade the power of labor. As a businessman, Trump has played hardball with the workers at his holdings and is known to be hostile to unions. Now, with the three branches of government at the federal level under their control, we expect to see a comprehensive assault on the union shop nationwide.

So, in face of this dismal scenario, what are unions & rank and file workers to do? Let’s look at what happened in Wisconsin six years ago, when a right-wing anti-worker state government mounted such an assault. Workers and their allies rose up in what was a powerful movement, occupying the state capitol for weeks, building an alliance of workers (both public and private sector), farmers, students, the poor, and others while conducting massive demonstrations (at times reaching well over 100,000 participants) and winning broad popular support. Nevertheless, they lost, suffering the first of what would be a series of labor defeats in Midwestern states in the months and years to follow. Why did they lose?



Workers rally at the state capitol in Madison, Wisconsin in 2011

The short answer is despite all the energy, the breadth of the coalition, the dedication, commitment, and militancy, the union officials and the Democratic Party combined to stymie the potential power of the rank & file. The best they could offer was “respectable” protest and elections the next time around (the Democrats – believe it or not – actually offered up for the historic “recall election” the same lackluster candidate who had lost to Republican Scott Walker a year earlier!). The times however, called for – then as they do now - action on the scale that we saw in the 1930s. Then, the modern labor movement was born, as thousands of workers occupied their workplaces, joined militant labor organizations, and went out on strike. In short, we need to do everything they did in Wisconsin – build the labor-community alliance, develop solidarity among disparate sectors of the working class, stage dramatic and militant actions in conjunction with mass rallies and demonstrations – but not stop there. We still have the legal right to strike and otherwise engage in industrial action. We *must* be ready, willing and able to use it!

Ron Kaminkow is the General Secretary of Railroad Workers United. He has worked as a brakeman, conductor and engineer for Conrail and NS in Chicago, and now works as an engineer for Amtrak. He is a member of BLET #51 and is the local’s National Division Delegate.

