

Why an Alliance of Rail Labor & the Community is Essential

Railroad Workers United is proud to be at the forefront of the emerging labor-community alliance to defend our mutual interests. Railroad workers and the communities we operate through have similar yet differing interests. But these interests are surely close enough that they pose a historic possibility, a window of opportunity, for a new alliance that would strengthen both labor and community vis a vis the rail carriers.

EDITORIAL

Since the terrible tragedy at Lac Megantic, Quebec in 2013 that killed 47 people and destroyed the small Canadian border town when an oil train ran away and derailed in a fiery explosion, the railroad has been increasingly on the public radar. Throughout the remainder of 2013 and into 2014, a series of high profile train wrecks, including numerous oil train derailments, fires and explosions has fueled fears both real and imagined among the public. The dramatic increase of oil shipments by rail has trackside communities alarmed, farmers and other shippers aggravated and angry, and environmental activists up in arms. The spotlight is on the railroad like it has not been for decades.

This atmosphere has of course led to a lot of misinformation and misunderstanding about the nature of the railroad. But while we cannot expect non-railroaders to be experts overnight at understanding what the railroad is all about and how it functions, we can take a hand in educating the public while working with them to push the railroad to become more responsive to the needs and wishes of trackside communities, shippers, railroad workers, and society at large.

Railroad workers once were a huge portion of the workforce. A hundred years ago, when the workforce was just a fraction of the size it is today, there were two million railroad workers. Today, there is less than 10% of that number. No longer does every citizen have a father, brother, uncle, son or daughter who works on the railroad. Far fewer Americans regularly ride the train now. And many have little exposure or interaction with the railroad, as thousands of miles of branch and mainline track have been eliminated. As a result of all this, railroad workers and our unions have lost power and influence. Meantime the rail carriers on the other hand, have become ever more concentrated, wealthy and dominant.

So now more than ever we need to reach out to the community and society as a whole for support and assistance in order to win our battles with the rail carriers. Citizens who want safe communities, a healthy environment, good public transportation, uncrowded highways and all the rest are our natural allies. While they may have their criticisms of the railroad, don't we as well? And while some citizens do not appreciate the intrinsically safe, efficient, and environmentally sensitive nature of railroading, many more understand and appreciate the railroad. They just have a few reservations when a freight train

laden with toxic chemicals derails into their front yard.

Therefore, they are open and receptive to our criticisms of the railroad. Things like chronic crew fatigue, the specter of single employee crews, safety programs that blame workers yet fail to fix glaring hazards; the general lack of time off for family and rest; draconian attendance policies that force us to work when we are not fit; excessively long and heavy trains and more are all issues of concern to the average railroad worker and yes, of concern to the average citizen too, especially those living in trackside communities.

This past summer we caught a glimpse of an example of what we can achieve when citizens and railroad workers act together. While BNSF trainmen voiced their opposition to the SMART-BNSF tentative agreement that would have allowed single employee train operations, other railroaders were joined by a spirited crowd of environmental and community activists on the picket line outside the hall. Together, we raised the issue before the public, educated the citizenry of what was afoot, and inspired railroad workers across the BNSF system to fight back and vote no on the contract.

As we know, the battle against single employee crews is far from over. The fight to defend our wages, benefits and working conditions knows no end. We need all the help we can get! Therefore, we must appreciate the nature of the system and broaden our horizons. Huge and powerful corporations – the big rail carriers in particular – wield great power and influence in society. They have allies in many places, and largely control both political parties, the courts and the media. To fight back we need numbers, the kind of numbers we simply no longer have in our unions. But the majority of the people are workers, and they live in the community right alongside of us. To win, we need them. And likewise, they need us. It's time for an alliance of labor, community and the environment!



Railroad workers and their allies in the community picket against single employee crews in Seattle, August 2014. What can we accomplish with this emerging labor-community alliance?