

National Rail Bargaining Begins in the U.S. in January

In January, contract negotiations are scheduled to commence between the major U.S. rail carriers and the 13 unions representing some 143,000 workers. Key issues in this round of bargaining will be the usual – compensation, health care costs, and work rules. While numerous so-called “on-property” agreements in recent years have usurped various aspects of these negotiations, the “master contract” is still one of major importance to all railroad workers of North America.

The rail carriers – despite making record profits in recent years – have already made it clear that they intend to play hardball with the unions. “Our compensation and benefit costs must reflect the marketplace in which we compete,” the railroad bargaining notice reads. “Anachronistic work rules and practices that hinder our ability to give customers high-quality, cost-effective service, and which add unnecessary costs, must be reformed.” In short, the railroads are continuing to play the same old card they always do; i.e., that despite tremendous roll-backs over the past three decades, they are not done with us yet. That is their theme: *You need to work harder, longer and more efficiently ... for less pay and benefits.*

The railroads have laid out a number of key themes in their bargaining notice to the unions:

1 – Linking pay to productivity and performance. Most companies – and the rail carriers are no exception – love this idea. In effect, they want to go back to pre-union days when they could compensate different employees who perform the same task at variable rates. Sadly, many workers fall for this scheme, thinking that they are “good” workers, and that they offer superior performance and should be compensated accordingly. But solidarity is destroyed under such a scheme, and it

becomes literally “every man for himself”. The ultimate conclusion from this sort of “productivity and performance” pay is a non-union shop. *Therefore, we want a fair and just base-building wage increase for all railroad workers, period!*

2 – Modifying health care plans so that workers bear more of the costs, consistent with what the railroads call “mainstream U.S. business norms”. As always, the carriers plead that they only want to keep up with the “norm” and stay on par with what other industries pay for their workers’ health care. While it is true that railroad workers have relatively good health care coverage, we fought for it and sacrificed to get it. And our industry is one of the most unionized sectors of the economy. We damn well better have good health care coverage! But if we buy the carriers’ line that they just want to be in step with the rest of American industry, then we might as well buy the line that we should all be low paid non-union laborers, since today, most U.S. blue-collar workers hold mostly non-union low paying jobs offering little or no health insurance. *We deserve to keep our health care plans intact with no concessions!*

3 – Revising work rules that “impede the productive utilization of employees.” In other words, here the carriers are saying that they want to “utilize” us as they see fit, on any tour of duty, during any given pay period, whenever and however they see fit. Work rules are basically what differentiates a union shop from a non-union shop. When the employer can do pretty much whatever they want with us whenever they want to, it is as if we no longer have a union environment, and we forfeit much of our rights at work. *We refuse to sell our souls (and our unions) and give away any more of our hard fought for work rules!*