

Opinion & Commentary

Railroad Workers and our Communities Must Seek Common Ground

Well, this is my first commentary since I was fortunate enough to be liberated from, what Eugene V. Debs eloquently referred to as, “industrial wage slavery”. For those of you not familiar with the platitudes of my main man Eugene, I’m referring to my retirement from the railroad in January.

As I was getting closer, crossing off the days on my “jail cell calendar”, a common question posed to me from my co-workers was, “What are you going to do?” My response was simple. “I’m going to take back, as much as possible, the life that they’ve robbed from me over the years.” While that includes more quality time with family and friends, various recreational, intellectual and cultural interests, my activism is also an important part of that. So even though I no longer have to scramble around every day, preparing and packing lunch and dinner to endure a 12-hour plus day at that infamous, notorious, toxic cesspool, Hellhole, prison-industrial plantation - AKA CP Rail Bensenville Yard, I remain an angry “young” man. Why? I don’t think I’m going out on a limb here by declaring that there is a whole lot more that is wrong in this society and in this world, beyond the daily indignations I endured, as well as what rail workers face in general. Like many, I became aware of various forms and manifestations of injustice in my youth. As I came of age, the backdrop to my formative years was all kinds of social upheaval, swirling all around from numerous directions. Some people, understandably, try to look the other way, search for an escape route and/or seek shelter. Some of us simply cannot accept the injustices that we perceive and make a conscious decision to confront them. So we explore and inquire, trying to sort out the truth from conflicting narratives. I had already started down this path when I started railroading at age eighteen in 1974.

Over the years, various stimuli inspired me to study how the intersection/interaction of economics, politics and history impacted our lives from the past to the present, contemplating the possibilities for the future. As I delved into the history of our unions, I learned the truth about the conditions that inspired and drove these historic, courageous struggles, as well as the repression our forefathers faced. I began to connect the dots, that the labor movement’s quest for respect and dignity is a critical component of the universal struggle for social, political, economic, and environmental justice, in all its many manifestations and battlegrounds.

Fast forward to the present. In May I had the honor to speak on behalf of RWU at a *Break Free Midwest 2016* rally in Whiting, IN, just outside of Chicago, a place of refineries, steel mills, other heavy industry, and of course, railroads. In addition to some of the organizations we’ve previously collaborated with for our “*Railroad Safety: Workers, Community and the Environment*” conferences, other fighters and activists from the region were represented. Michiganders are fighting on many fronts — from the impact of the Enbridge Corp. pipeline spill in the Kalamazoo River, to threatened water shutoffs in Detroit, to the scandalous poisoning of Flint’s drinking water by the unelected Emergency Manager. When General Motors Corp. complained that the foul water was not healthy for the engines at the assembly plant, the company was allowed to switch back to the original source, while the residents were

stuck with the “new and improved”, cost-effective water source.

Jean Ross, co-chair of National Nurses United championed the just demands/concerns of workers who could be most immediately impacted by a transition from fossil fuels. As thousands of rail workers, coal miners and refinery workers are currently unemployed, due mainly to market fluctuations, this is an important issue to confront today. Workers should not be forced to disproportionately pay the cost of switching from a fossil fuel based economy to one driven by renewables. Her call is one for “jobs and the environment.”

A leader of Black Lives Matter Gary/NW Indiana spoke about environmental racism, while Tara Houska, Indigenous Liaison to the Bernie Sanders campaign, eloquently shared that perspective. When Naomi Davis, from Blacks in Green, introduced Ms. Houska, referencing the harsh treatment dealt the original inhabitants of this continent, she cited this as the first scenario where “... certain people were disposable, certain people, their lives did not matter.” Fallen railroad workers killed on the job, as well as the forty-seven victims in Lac Megantic, immediately came to mind.

Suffice to say this was a very diverse gathering, with the participants representing a broad spectrum of humanity. While I, as an individual — and RWU, as an organization — may not agree 100% with every position and demand articulated amongst the few hundred present, I feel it’s more important to accentuate the abundant common ground that unites us. We are all fighting powerful adversaries (corporations, the banks, Wall Street, and local, state, and federal government, etc.) against some form of injustice, for respect and dignity. And the gathering was very receptive to RWU and our fundamental rail safety issues, such as ridiculously long and heavy trains, single employee train crews, fatigue inducing work schedules, and deferred maintenance of infrastructure.

A common question that has come up over the years is, “How can we get past the legal straightjacket of the Railway Labor Act?” My response has always been, “We need to take our case to the public. If they only knew the potential for disaster that exists from the reckless, irresponsible, profit-driven reductions in staffing and maintenance, they would be horrified and called to action.” Just as there is no blueprint to guide us in overcoming the historic craft divisions of rail labor that sap our potential strength, there is no step-by-step instruction manual on how to effectively plead our case in the court of public opinion. That said, I’m proud as hell to be part of RWU’s “research and development” project.

Mark Burrows has served as Organizer and Co-Chair for Railroad Workers United. He retired earlier this year after hiring out in 1974, working as an engineer for a combined total of 37 years for the Chicago North Western and the Soo Line/Canadian Pacific in Chicago, Illinois. He continues to be an active member of RWU and a contributing writer to this newsletter.

