

# Special Report - RWU Fifth Biennial Convention

While the RWU Convention did what most conventions do: adopt bylaws changes and resolutions, hear reports, take care of business, party and socialize, the focus of this Convention was a lot more than that. More than a dozen diverse workshops and presentations were offered up throughout the course of the two-day event. They are all summarized below. To learn more, see the RWU website.

## Alternatives to Behavior Based Safety

RWU Organizer and former Co-Chair John "J.P." Wright got the Convention rolling with his presentation on alternatives to "Behavior Based Safety" (otherwise known as BS). Since the founding Convention, RWU has pledged to fight BS programs that the rail carriers promote, because they focus on worker behavior, not on hazard elimination. This presentation explored the prospects for a model safety program that workers and their unions can work towards that would be authentically under our control, not the carriers, what it might look like, and why it is so essential if we are to achieve a workplace based upon solidarity, justice and safe working conditions.

## French Railway Workers Fight Privatization

Former railroad machinist turned station agent Kaourant Lampriere spoke briefly on the nature of the struggle of French Railway workers against the parceling out and privatization of the French National Railway Company (SNCF). Brother "Kaou" then described the efforts of his union - SUD Rail - and others to build the organization "Rails without Borders". This loose network of railroad workers' organizations is comprised of railroad workers groups mostly in Europe and Africa. RWU joined following Kaou's presentation at our 2014 Convention. Hopefully, RWU will be able to send a representative to the international gathering of railroad workers, hosted by the Metro workers union in Sao Paulo, Brazil in July 2016.

## Just Hours and Safe, Sustainable Work Schedules

RWU member Fritz Edler led a discussion on the need for railroad workers - like other workers - to have a work schedule that accommodates the need for sleep, rest and recreation, time for family/friends and other aspects of life. Unfortunately, many railroad workers - especially in the T&E crafts - have work schedules that result in chronic fatigue and wreak havoc on our health and personal life in general. Many railroaders working extra boards and freight pools have no schedule at all. This is a central issue for railroad workers, one that simply must be dealt with in the coming years.



*RWU Co-Chair Jen Wallis, Treasurer Hugh Sawyer, and General Secretary Ron Kaminkow look on as Renzenberger railroad crew transport drivers give a spirited presentation at the RWU Convention, 3/31/16.*

## W&LE Workers Resist Single Employee Train Crews

Engineers and trainmen on regional railroad Wheeling & Lake Erie (W&LE) have been waging a heroic battle against single employee train operations for more than a decade now. Lonnie Swigert, Local Chairman of BLET #292 presented a summary of the events leading up to the 2013 strike and succeeding actions, and outlined the prospects for victory going forward. Because of the solidarity and assistance offered by RWU to the W&LE brothers the last few years, the membership authorized Brother Swigert to attend and present at the Convention. Following the Convention, Lonnie was interviewed on film which is now available on U-Tube. RWU has pledged to continue to do whatever we can to support this vital struggle.

## Advancing the Fight for the Two-Person Crew

Following Brother Swigert's presentation, RWU member and recently retired Amtrak engineer Fritz Edler lead this important discussion. Opposition to single employee train crews has been a centerpiece of RWU since the founding convention 8 years ago, and dates back to forerunner organization ROCU to 2005. Fritz outlined the history of the struggle and led a lively discussion of various tactics at our disposal to fight and ultimately win the battle against single employee crews. All this came within a week of the FRA announcing its Proposed Rule on two person train crews.

## Building Solidarity with Railroad Crew Van Drivers

Three crew transport drivers - Michelle Burke, Adam Anderson (Chicago), and Laura Johnson (California) - members and stewards of the United Electrical workers (UE), discussed the working condition and issues they face and their efforts to build a union at Renzenberger, the largest of the contractors providing rail transport services to train crews. Van drivers and railroad workers alike agreed that we share mutual concerns and that by working together in solidarity and struggle, we both can more easily achieve our goals and objectives.

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## Convention Hosts Over a Dozen Workshops and Presentations

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### Supply Chain Research: International Solidarity

Gifford Hartman, an adult education teacher in San Francisco and an RWU solidarity member, discussed the essential task for workers and their organizations to work in solidarity along the distribution supply chains in order to achieve power across craft, industry, locality and nations that is needed to win against huge multinational corporations of the modern era. Gifford gave a similar workshop at the 2014 Convention.

### Building the Labor - Community Alliance



Activist Abby Brockway

The final word for Thursday came from environmental/community activist Abby Brockway and RWU Co-Chair Jen Wallis for a workshop on coalition building between “non-traditional” allies. While there may always be issues that railroad workers and enviros may not be in agreement with one another, there is common ground and ample opportunity to forge an alliance around a number of issues and struggles such as railroad safety.

### If you Care About Railroad Safety, Support Tom Harding

The terrible train wreck at Lac Megantic is being blamed on the railroad workers rather than the railroad company, scapegoated for the reckless and irresponsible policies and procedures of renegade Ed Burkhardt and the MM&A, together with the failure of the Canadian government to properly regulate the rail industry. (See Pages 3-4 for a report, Page 11 for the RWU editorial). Thomas P. Walsh, attorney for the locomotive engineer Tom Harding recounted the events to date and outlined the argument for the defense. Coming

just weeks after new revelations of carrier irresponsibility (see Page 11), Walsh’s presentation and the case to defend these brothers against persecution were particularly poignant.

### Building Solidarity with Railroad Workers Around the World

Just before lunch, in what would be a highlight of the Convention for many, railroad workers from three Asian nations – Japan, Korea and China – explained the nature of railroad Japan, Korea and China – explained the nature of railroad workers struggle in each of their respective countries, and discussed efforts at building international solidarity with one another together with workers in the U.S. and elsewhere. In fact, their appearance at the RWU Convention was just one of many stops enroute to building that solidarity. The discussion

would build upon Thursday’s presentation by French railroad workers Kaourantin Lampriere and “Rails Without Borders”.

### Reviving the Strike

Joe Burns – author of a number of books on unions and the labor movement – made the case that labor’s most important and essential tactic – the strike – must be revived if workers, and railroad workers in particular, are to make progress and stop the downward slide. He noted that until the 1990s

strikes were common in the rail industry, but gradually began to drop off in the 1980s until today they are almost unheard of, despite the fact that technically, we still have the right to strike. Flight attendants, like railroaders, work under the Railway Labor Act (RLA), and have engaged in partial and “quickie” strikes in the recent years with much success, using an innovative campaign called CHAOS (Create Havoc Around Our System).

### Railroad Workers and a “Just Transition”

Joe Uehlein – Founder of the Labor Network for Sustainability – discussed the concept of “just transition” and how workers involved in the extraction, production and transportation of unsustainable fossil fuels can be part of the global solution while not putting our livelihoods at risk. Building on the theme of Thursday’s presentation by Wallis & Brockway on alliance building, Uehlein urged a new political alignment, a so-called “blue-green alliance” to not only preserve and protect our natural resources, air, water, etc., but also our wages, benefits and conditions of employment.

### Railroads Hold the Key to the Green Future

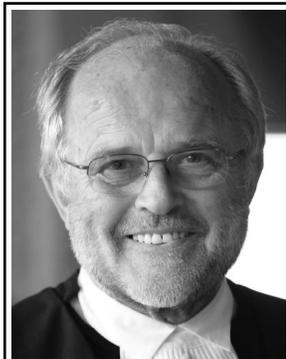
Brother Fritz Edler led the final discussion of the Convention. He started by describing the efforts that he and his co-workers undertook to develop and implement a “green diesel project” that placed clean switch engines into service, benefiting workers, passengers and the general public in the vicinity of Washington Union Station. Using this as an example, he opened the floor to discussion on ways that workers can take the lead in transforming the railroad into a “greener” healthier industry, one that better serves its customers, workers, passengers, the community in general and the public at large.

### Conclusion

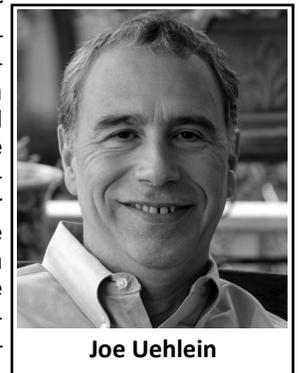
The tone has been set for RWU in these convention presentations. Now the task at hand is to mobilize to make it all happen. Solidarity, Unity, Democracy ... and Action!!



Korean Engineer  
Ho-Joon Song



Defense Attorney  
Tomas P. Walsh



Joe Uehlein