

Railroad Workers Have the Moral and Ethical Right to Resist

At the end of my commentary in the Winter 2017 issue of *The Highball* ("Now that the 2016 Elections are Over, What is the Way Forward?"), I promised that, "This rant-and-rage stream of consciousness to be continued..." However, before I continue where I left off, I'd like to step back and frame this discussion in the context of how it fits into the essence of what RWU is about. The full length version of our Statement of Principles (SoP) can be found on our website: railroadworkersunited.org. The short version bullet points in the box at the bottom of Page 2 are: Unity of All Rail Crafts; An End to Inter-Union Conflict; Rank-and-File Democracy; Membership Participation and Action; Solidarity Among All Railroaders; No to Concessionary Bargaining. While the fact that this document holds up well after nine years is a credit to the ideals, vision and fighting spirit of RWU's founders, this fact doesn't bode well for the situation that rails find themselves in at present, much less for the foreseeable future. I've always summed up RWU's mission in my own words by posing the question: How can we make our unions' stronger, in order to more effectively fight for a safe work environment, as well as dignity on and off the job? Whether you're a long time member/supporter of RWU, or you're reading *The Highball* for the first time, I'm confident that most of us reading this not only agree with RWU's mission, but that we have our work cut out for us. In spite of that common ground amongst us, it's fair to say that there exists a broad range of diverse political opinions, analysis and conclusions that we're not going to resolve today or tomorrow.

In the Winter 2017 issue of this newsletter, the Commentary, "*Drastic Times Call for Labor to Once Again Take Industrial Action*", listed some of the most serious issues that railroad workers are concerned about, such as Bargaining, Single Employee Crews, Railroad Retirement, FELA, Amtrak, and the Union Shop (see lead article, Page 1), just to name a few. But these issues did not make their debut on the morning of January 20th with Trump's inauguration. RWU was founded in Spring of 2008. Obama took office in January 2009. According to the overwhelming majority of the AFL-CIO leadership, rail unions included, Obama was going to be some kind of savior for the working class, since we're apparently so helpless. During his administration's first two years, the Democrats controlled the House and Senate. According to the union leaders' comforting bedtime stories, "If we just get out the vote for our 'friends' of labor, they'll make everything all right for us." So how has all that worked out for us? Our website has all of the back issues of *The Highball*. Well, I went back and checked them out the back issues from those years, 2009 - 2010, and I just couldn't find any articles heralding a new age of workers' paradise in the rail industry. What I did find were plenty of articles that warned of the imminent attacks that we are facing today, and advocated for organizing resistance.

On a day to day basis, at the surface level, it may seem that the enemy is some power-tripping trainmaster or some evil superintendent. But if we dig below that surface, we will find that it is economics and politics that drive their attacks on us. The CEO's, board of directors and other shadow investors demand a higher rate of profit. The field supervisors are simply their servile lackeys and enforcers, mandated to extract as

much production out of us as humanly possible. When we won't voluntarily submit to management's whims at the bargaining table, they have an arsenal of "weapons" to threaten us with, such as arbitration and/or a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB), compliments of the Railway Labor Act (RLA). When a tentative agreement is reached, the union leaders squawk like a parrot tortured by a broken record: "Well it's not as good as we would've liked, but we urge you to ratify it, because if it goes to a third party (i.e., "neutral" arbitrators and/or the government), it could be worse." Many of the politicians they don't want voting on our contracts - and rightfully so - are the exact same ones - the "friends of labor" - whose campaigns they had just recently funded with a portion of our union dues.

Getting back to the essence of RWU's SoP and mission, another way to summarize it is that we simply want strong unions that can defend us and fight for our interests. What is labor's ultimate, last-line-of-defense "weapon" that we have, when all else fails? I call it our moral and ethical right to collectively withhold our labor from a tyrannical employer, aka, a "strike". That all sounds good, but per the RLA, the President can order us back to work, a PEB can draft a contract, and Congress can ratify it, end of discussion. Or is it? The carriers and the government will have the final say *only* if we accept and allow that. Throughout history, when movements for social justice have made progress, collectively voting with one's feet to assert their moral and ethical rights over what they considered to be unjust, laws, injunctions and/or restraining orders has been decisive at critical junctures (for example, see article on Page 4). I need to be clear that I am not publicly advocating that railroad workers defy a Presidential back-to-work order the next time that's posed. If I did that, quite possibly I'd get hauled off to Guantanamo, leaving some of you to wonder, "Whatever happened to that character who wrote those scathing commentaries, seething with righteous indignation?"

What I am suggesting is that this question be on the agenda for personal contemplation and collective discussion. How can we plead our case to the public, in order to build the necessary alliances we need? What kind of political tactics and strategies do we need to effectively fight for our interests? Today's reality is that the corporations and the government freely exercise their legal right to impose unsafe working conditions, poison, maim and kill us, destroy the environment, terrorize indigenous communities, immigrants and minorities, obliterate anyone who has the misfortune to be caught in the crossfire of the international turf war over energy resources etc. But do they have the moral and ethical right to do so? Imagine the possibilities if the vast majority of society decided NO and proceeded to vote with their feet.

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