

Editorial

Trackworkers and the “Day of Action” Point the Way Forward for Rail Labor

The railroad workers “Day of Action” initiated by the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees Division (BMWED) was a major step forward for rail labor in today’s “age of acquiescence”. The union’s rank & file, together with the leadership, took to the streets to demand that the nation’s rail carriers stop stalling in national negotiations and bargain in good faith towards a fair and just contract for not just the 30,000 members of that organization, but for all of rail labor. Rather than go along with “business as usual”, the membership decided that it was time to take action.

The decision to conduct a public protest rally comes on the heels of a concerted effort by the union to involve its members in this round of contract negotiations. Perhaps no other union of the thirteen or so that represent rail workers has done more to inform, educate, and mobilize its members around the contract negotiations process. Without the rank & file’s participation at every step of the process, no union is able to win a decent contract.

The union surveyed its members long before contract negotiations even began to better understand their issues/concerns, and followed up by training hundreds of internal organizers and establishing a network to keep the members active and informed. The members said healthcare was of prime concern and the union has gone on to endorse a national “Medicare for all” single-payer system, and mobilized members in support of this goal. The leadership has conducted regular “town hall” meetings to provide updates as bargaining progresses, available online for all members (and all rail workers) to view. In the face of the carriers’ intransigence, the union opted to call for the *Day of Action*. Apparently there are plans to escalate such actions should the carriers remain steadfast.

Railroad Workers United commends the BMWED for its progressive and democratic actions outlined above. We optimistically look forward to doing what we can to assist and support the next step. And we have a few ideas of how to build the rail workers’ movement for a good contract:

1 – Conduct *regular* “Days of Action” that will take on a life of their own. Why not conduct such “informational pickets” every month, possibly every week? Once they get rolling, it will require far less effort to keep them going, and become second nature for workers to attend the regularly scheduled action.

2 – Whether they become regular actions or special events, more advance notice is needed for workers and their unions to discuss, debate and sign on to the event. Had the May 3rd action been announced earlier, locals, divisions and lodges of the other twelve unions could have had the time to bring the issue to the floor of their union meeting, adopt a resolution of support, organize and otherwise help build for the event.

3 – Build alliances with allies both inside and outside of the labor movement by courting various unions, community and environmental groups. BMWED’s efforts to include Jobs with Justice, the Labor Coalition in Support of Single Payer and groups like the Sierra Club is a step in the right direction. Let’s expand this outreach to likely allies such as the transit union (ATU), longshoreman (ILWU), electrical workers (UE), Teamsters (IBT) and other transport workers; as well as community and environmental groups concerned with rail safety, like the

scores of groups that are part of the RWU safety conferences.

4 – Include more than just three terminals in the action. While big terminals like Chicago and Roseville are important, dozens of large terminals - Kansas City, St. Louis, Twin Cities, Pittsburg, Atlanta, New Orleans, Houston, Seattle, LA - Long Beach to name a few - are just as key. In addition, medium and small terminals should be encouraged to take action as well to ensure that these workers see themselves as vital to the success of the campaign and to show the rail carriers that this is not just a photo op, but rather that we have workers at all levels, throughout the entire system, who are informed, motivated, and ready for action.

5 – When possible, schedule actions in conjunction with other local/national activities. Labor Day presents a great upcoming opportunity for action. Likewise, May Day (International Workers Day) - just two days prior to the May 3rd Day of Action - was a huge day of strikes and demonstrations of mostly low wage workers around the United States. Combining our efforts with other workers’ and peoples’ movements multiplies our power, educates these other movements of our existence and our issues, and sends a message that we are here to support them, as they are here to support us!

6 – Where possible, we should strive to unite freight and passenger railroad workers, who often have little contact with one another and who do not necessarily understand their common interests. In general, what the freight industry settles on becomes the pattern that will be served up to the passenger industry. And the passenger industry is where most Americans interface with the railroad, offering a key opportunity to build support among the general public.

7 – We need to include *everyone* in future events and actions, providing opportunities for all rail workers to take part. If for example, your terminal is not conducting a rally, or perhaps you are on-duty and unable to take part, organizers could provide T-shirts, arm bands or buttons for union members to wear, proclaiming support for the action *on the inside*.

8 – Finally, we need to let the carriers know that these actions are part of a concerted campaign, one that is bound to escalate if they are not responsive to our demands. Rallies, pickets, demonstrations and other public displays are great, and can be very effective at pressuring your adversary. But sometimes, those actions need to be escalated before the powers-that-be take notice. “Practice strikes”, “quickie strikes”, collective visits to the boss, interventions at shareholders’ meetings or CEO residences, combined with other creative actions can apply pressure and win a good contract.

The key to victory is to involve the rank & file of *all crafts and all unions* at every step of the way, from decision making to execution, and to understand each and every action as part of an overarching strategy designed to apply ongoing pressure from a myriad of angles and sources. Union officials who oppose this approach must be called out as the sell-outs and bureaucrats that they are, and deposed as necessary. Actions like the all-craft May 3rd *Day of Action* have the potential to help build the necessary unity and solidarity we need, having been historically divided into 13 different craft unions. May 3rd has set the tone. We must build on it and take it forward.