

Now that the 2016 Elections are Over, What is the Way Forward?

At the 3rd RWU Convention, in May 2012, we passed, "RWU Resolution on the 2012 U.S. Elections". This resolution sought to make the case and advocate for the long overdue, historical necessity for labor to reject the virtual straight-jacket of the two-party political system; to chart a course for an independent political party, based upon the organizational structure and foundations of our unions; incorporating all of our natural allies in the struggle for social, political, economic and environmental justice. Such a party could enable us to effectively bring the weight of our economic power and overwhelming numerical majority to this struggle. At the 5th RWU Convention in May 2016, in the context of Sanders' and Trump's populist rhetoric and promises to challenge the status-quo (personified by Clinton), we adopted "RWU Resolution on the 2016 U.S. Elections." This resolution sought to bring the basic themes of the 2012 resolution into the present, to coincide with our updated reality. Please go to our website - railroadworkersunited.org; click on the "Resolutions" link, follow that to the links to resolutions passed at the 2012 and 2016 Conventions.

It goes without saying that politics can be controversial but for now, I hope that we can all agree on this much: We can no longer allow the bosses, politicians, bureaucrats, lobbyists, union leaders, CEO's, insider hacks, pompous windbag know-nothing media pundits etc. to control the narrative, agenda, discussion and choices that affect our lives - from our respective day-day personal struggles to the complex issues of the world we live in, which, last time I checked, is rapidly "going to Hell in a handbasket. It's been more than 45 years since I was first introduced to this concept of what some refer to as a Labor Party, and convinced of its necessity. All that has transpired since then has only fortified my convictions. With this *Commentary* I'll interject my own personal thoughts, observations, experiences and perspectives into this necessary fraternal discussion. Regardless of which candidate you may have supported, for whatever reasons, my objective here is to advance a civilized, constructive dialogue amongst ourselves as rails, along with other workers in various private/public entities, as well as our allies in the community at large, that attempts to define our common interests. From there, the question inevitably posed is, "What methods of struggle and political strategies can we unify around in order to effectively fight for our common objectives?"

In spite of the inevitable ideological/political differences that may exist amongst some of us at this point in time, what kind of common ground/interests can we unite around? As rails we want a strong union that can effectively fight for a safe, dignified working environment with quality of life on and off the job. As workers, we want the same for all fellow workers in the private and public sector, since an injury to one is an injury to all. As citizens of the community, we want a clean, healthy environment for ourselves now, as well as for our children's children's children. We'd like to see social, economic and political justice for all since, to quote poet, novelist and playwright Langston Hughes, "As long as one man is in chains, no man is free." As human beings, most of us would like to see a world that is not violently convulsing, imploding and drowning in its own blood. Is this all just a fairy tale or can we transform this idealistic vision into reality?

We were reduced to choosing between the two most unpopular presidential candidates in history, with Clinton and Trump both having negative ratings over 60%. This fact alone could make the case that the current political system is beyond bankrupt. That said, I get why many workers voted for Trump. Many understandably voted against Clinton. I'm convinced those workers, who enthusiastically voted for Trump, will feel the sting of betrayal soon enough, but how much better off would we have really been with Clinton? Depending on her target audience, she was either: 1) the entitled "heir" to husband Bill's "throne", and would continue his well documented attacks on the working class (Wall St execs ate that up); or 2) would be the equivalent of a 3rd Obama term (his constituency apparently wasn't that impressed).

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Since the only "fight-back" strategy our unions have is to get-out-the-vote for our so called "friends" of labor, usually Democratic Party politicians, this is what I want to challenge for now. So how have we as rails, as well as society in general, fared during the last eight years under Obama? In my previous Commentaries, I described the sordid details of how we were getting virtually slaughtered at CP Rail Bensenville Yard. I know that many rails around the country could relate to those horror stories. "Do as you're told, file your grievance later." In the three+ years since the horrific tragedy in Lac-Mégantic, what has Obama's FRA done to make the railroads safer for workers as well as the general public? How have our brothers at the Wheeling & Lake Erie fared on Obama's watch? While Obama may have been forced to concede what may only be a temporary victory for our courageous brothers and sisters at Standing Rock, he owns the unjustifiable, violent repression inflicted upon them. Ditto the response to some of the protests against police brutality and Occupy demonstrations. The leaders of our rail unions told us it was in our best interests to vote for Hillary Clinton, who is BFF with Warren Buffet, CEO of BN, who tried to sell an engineer-only agreement on a major Class 1 railroad. By doing so, the rail union leadership has definitively declared its own political and ethical bankruptcy. Einstein said, "The definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results." There are many more reasons I could cite to make the case that the working class and our allies need to organize an independent political party to effectively fight for OUR interests. This rant-and-rage stream of consciousness to be continued ...

Mark Burrows has served as Organizer and Co-Chair for Railroad Workers United. He retired last winter 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.





Opinion & Commentary

Drastic Times Call for Labor to Once Again Take “Industrial Action”

More than 35 years ago, the Reagan administration declared war on the labor movement in the U.S. firing the air traffic controllers, sending the signal that it was open season on workers and their organizations. Many an “old-head” railroader has been known to quip: “We should have shut the country down” and defended not just the Controllers, but all of us. Well, we did not, and our wages, benefits and working conditions – and the labor movement – have been on the downslide ever since.

So, what will we as workers – and as railroad workers specifically – do this time around? After three or four decades of decline, defeat and demoralization, we most definitely have our work cut out for us. So when we do mount an opposition to those in government and industry who would destroy us, we must seek out and develop creative tactics. And while we certainly must look to the future for these innovative tools to win with, we must also look back and remember the basics – like the strike – that built the labor movement and allowed the way forward for working people to begin with.

So just what do we expect to be coming our way? Let’s take a look at what the carriers and the government might have in store for us in the coming months and years.

Bargaining: No sooner had election results been announced and the carriers were drooling, rubbing their hands in glee. They fully expect our defeat at the bargaining table, and have refused to bargain in good faith. National handling has ground to a halt. The same is true at Amtrak. The carriers are intent on playing hardball, confident that they can stick it to the unions with a lousy contract and a PEB to their liking, if it comes to it.

Single Employee Crews: The FRA failed to issue a final rule on train crew staffing. Given the agency’s feeble draft attempt last March, and the incoming Trump administration’s rhetoric against “government regulation”, it is unlikely we will win anything here. The carriers are emboldened in their drive to run trains with single crews given the outcome of the elections.

Railroad Retirement: House Speaker Paul Ryan has made no secret – prior to his assumption of the Speakership - of his hostility to the railroad retirement system and his goal to dismantle what is one of rail workers’ most cherished benefits. Now as House Speaker, with colleague Mitch McConnell as the Senate Majority Leader and with Trump in the White House, we would be wise to prepare for a full-frontal assault here.

FELA: The Federal Employers Liability Act has been around since 1908, assisting railroad workers in our fight for a safer workplace, penalizing the carrier when one of us is injured or killed on the job. The carriers have wished to reform or eliminate FELA, but have not had the chance. Given the current situation, they may mount an offensive to repeal this piece of “government regulation” and “interference” in business.

Amtrak: The leadership of all three branches of government has expressed their contempt for Amtrak. Despite his calls for infrastructure investment and high speed rail, Trump’s rhetoric does not necessarily translate into support for a quasi-public transportation system, or any form of public transit. Amtrak’s long distance trains may be in grave danger, and the company’s existence might well be in jeopardy.

Union Shop: In recent decades, the Republican party has made clear their opposition to unions and the union shop. Where

The GOP has gained control of state legislatures in Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan and elsewhere, they have pushed their agenda to eliminate the union/agency shop and degrade the power of labor. As a businessman, Trump has played hardball with the workers at his holdings and is known to be hostile to unions. Now, with the three branches of government at the federal level under their control, we expect to see a comprehensive assault on the union shop nationwide.

So, in face of this dismal scenario, what are unions & rank and file workers to do? Let’s look at what happened in Wisconsin six years ago, when a right-wing anti-worker state government mounted such an assault. Workers and their allies rose up in what was a powerful movement, occupying the state capitol for weeks, building an alliance of workers (both public and private sector), farmers, students, the poor, and others while conducting massive demonstrations (at times reaching well over 100,000 participants) and winning broad popular support. Nevertheless, they lost, suffering the first of what would be a series of labor defeats in Midwestern states in the months and years to follow. Why did they lose?



Workers rally at the state capitol in Madison, Wisconsin in 2011

The short answer is despite all the energy, the breadth of the coalition, the dedication, commitment, and militancy, the union officials and the Democratic Party combined to stymie the potential power of the rank & file. The best they could offer was “respectable” protest and elections the next time around (the Democrats – believe it or not – actually offered up for the historic “recall election” the same lackluster candidate who had lost to Republican Scott Walker a year earlier!). The times however, called for – then as they do now - action on the scale that we saw in the 1930s. Then, the modern labor movement was born, as thousands of workers occupied their workplaces, joined militant labor organizations, and went out on strike. In short, we need to do everything they did in Wisconsin – build the labor-community alliance, develop solidarity among disparate sectors of the working class, stage dramatic and militant actions in conjunction with mass rallies and demonstrations – but not stop there. We still have the legal right to strike and otherwise engage in industrial action. We *must* be ready, willing and able to use it!

Ron Kaminkow is the General Secretary of Railroad Workers United. He has worked as a brakeman, conductor and engineer for Conrail and NS in Chicago, and now works as an engineer for Amtrak. He is a member of BLET #51 and is the local’s National Division Delegate.





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"You have got to unite in the same labor union, and in the same political party and strike and vote together, and the hour you do that, the world is yours."

Eugene V. Debs, Founder of the American Railway Union

The Fight to Defend Canadian Railroad Workers Enters Critical Period

Continued From Page 4

Last fall, nearly 3,000 people across North America signed petitions calling upon the Canadian and Quebec governments to drop the charges against the workers as the only path to real accountability for the devastating wreck. The two are charged with 47 counts of criminal negligence resulting in death. If convicted they could face life in prison. But it has become clear, based upon investigations, that their actions were not the cause of the disaster.

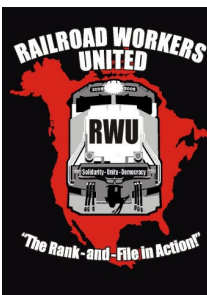
It has been 2 ½ years since the charges were filed against the two amidst lurid headlines with pictures of SWAT Team cops holding them in handcuffs. Yet the criminal trial has yet to begin. The Crown is now faced with a dilemma. The Canadian Supreme Court has found that too many criminal defendants are denied their rights to trial for long periods of time. It held that under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the "reasonable delay" limit to wait should not exceed 30 months.

The Crown Prosecutors plan for a big show trial, designed to inflame the public, beginning in September of 2017 (40 months after being charged). This will certainly exceed the limits set by the Court. But the Harding/Labrie defense team has announced that they will not press for dismissal based on the time limits, expressing their confidence that if they are given a fair trial that the two men will be vindicated. But failing to hold Harding and Labrie criminally responsible brings another dilemma. The only corporate entity charged for the disaster is the bankrupt and assetless MM&A. For all intents and purposes, it doesn't exist. Unless the two rail workers are scapegoated, no one would be held criminally liable. That result is likely politically untenable. A procedural hearing is set for January 26-27.

There is the very real danger that Harding and Labrie might be

convicted, railroaded off to prison, and that the books will be closed on rail carrier liability. Unionists who want strong organizations that can protect and defend them on the job would suffer a serious setback, as would environmentalists and community activists who want to see stricter and safer regulations of railroads. Rail safety in general will suffer, and a green light will be given to the energy and rail industries to simply blame the workers in future workplace catastrophes.

The January procedural hearing will determine the next phase of the struggle. Citizens from Lac-Mégantic expect to be present to voice their concerns. It is critical that those who understand the stakes keep up the struggle as this hearing could result in the initiation of the criminal trial soon thereafter. All railroaders, their families and supporters must be vigilant and ready to act. Please send solidarity messages for the Tom Harding and Richard Labrie defense to their union, USW 1976 / Section locale 1976, 2360 De Lasalle, Suite 202, Montreal, QC H1V 2L1. Email: info@1976usw.ca; copies to: Thomas Walsh, 165 Rue Wellington N. Suite 310, Sherbrooke, QC Canada J1H 5B9. Email: thomaswalsh@hotmail.com. And if you have yet to do so, please sign the petition to drop the charges at hardingdefense.org/sign-the-petition/



Drop the Charges!
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the Railroad Workers
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