



Railroad Workers United

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The Rank & File in Action!

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RWU and the Recent Tentative Agreement Penned by the NCCC and the CBG

The recent Tentative Agreement (TA) between the National Carriers Conference Committee (NCCC) and the Coordinated Bargaining Group (CBG) of six rail unions has been held up as victory by some, a lesser-of-two-evils (better than a PEB) by many, and a “sell-out” by others. Adhering to a reactionary tradition that is well over a hundred years old now, the various rail unions have initiated a war of words over the TA, pointing fingers and levelling charges at one another, playing into the hands of the rail carriers’ ability to divide-and-conquer. Ultimately, the rank & file of those six unions party to the agreement will have the final say. But whether they vote it up or down, one thing should be crystal clear to railroad workers – the method by which every one of the rail craft unions goes about bargaining contracts MUST be changed if we ever expect to win the contracts we deserve.

UNITY IS NECESSARY

Since our Founding Convention in 2008, Railroad Workers United (RWU) has taken the position that ALL rail unions MUST UNITE into *One Big Bargaining Coalition*. Our Convention Resolution #3 – “RWU Resolution on Building Real Bargaining Power” stated that RWU will work to convince every rail union to unite to create a *United Bargaining Coalition* and continuously cooperate with each other to strengthen bargaining power. The resolution committed RWU to educate rank & file members of all rail unions to support such a Coalition. RWU believes that “no one settles until all settle” must be the foundation of such a United Bargaining Coalition.

Unfortunately, we are burdened with the rail union leaders refusing to unite with one another for the benefit of the rank & file members. In fact, they never have. The current malaise could have easily been predicted, as it has long been their practice to ignore the needs of the other unions and settle for a contract that forces provisions on those other organizations before they are prepared to settle. They have each been doing this to the others for a century or more; they have *all* taken their turn.

CURRENT BARGAINING

This latest round of bargaining was a textbook case in how to NOT win a decent contract. The various unions divided themselves into three separate coalitions before bargaining began that rendered them incapable of reaching a just settlement.

The rail carriers – united as the NCCC - were once again pleased to negotiate with the divided powers of the unions. The carriers recently penned agreement is with the largest coalition which consists of six unions – known as the Coordinated Bargaining Group - which represents 58% of the rail labor workforce. They are the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen (BLET); Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, Transportation Union – Transportation Division (SMART-TD); Brotherhood of Boilermakers & Blacksmiths (BBO); National Conference of Firemen & Oilers (NCFO); Brotherhood of Railway Signalmen (BRS); and the American Train Dispatchers Association (ATDA).

Meanwhile, the smaller coalitions get left behind. One is made up of the Brotherhood of Maintenance-of-Way Employees Division (BMWED) and the SMART/Mechanical at 20%; and the other is composed of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), Brotherhood of Railway Carmen (BRC), and the Transportation Communication Union (TCU) at 22%. Should the rank & file members of the large coalition approve the agreement, it will become the pattern for the smaller coalitions. They in turn will most likely get nothing better, and may possibly be forced to settle for worse.

We all know it is absurd to be divided into three largely ineffectual “coalitions.” It is even more ridiculous once you look at the contradictions within the coalitions. Highlights include:

- The BLET and BMWED are both rail unions that are Teamster affiliates, but they have divided themselves into separate coalitions;
- The six shop craft unions (IBEW, IAM, BRC, SMART, IBBO, and NCFD) have divided themselves into each of the three coalitions. Of course, this greatly weakens their ability to build power across the shop;
- Amazingly, the members of SMART have divided themselves into different coalitions. The SMART-Transportation Division (TD) is in one group and the SMART-Mechanical is in another!

It is apparent why little progress was made in the last three years at the bargaining table. Without a single union or at least a single, united coalition it is impossible to build the solidarity and strength needed to win. Ultimately, such a union is what railroad workers need.

In its absence however, we must demand that the rail unions stick together as ONE in bargaining. The rail carriers have become even more powerful in recent years, and in the face of reduced freight traffic and lower overall profits in the past two years, they are bargaining from a position of strength while we remain hopelessly divided.

In addition, there are other factors causing our bargaining weakness. The culture in our unions has become undemocratic, extremely hierarchical and deeply conservative. In general, union leaders make no attempt to involve the rank & file members in the bargaining process. Most members do not know what the issues are being negotiated, who is doing the actual bargaining, and what they could do to help win a good contract.

WHAT WE MUST DO IN THE FUTURE

Given the environment in our unions and the hopelessly divided bargaining coalitions, it is unlikely that rail labor will win anything this round. If we want to win a good contract in the future, we must demand that our unions unite and start organizing *the day this current contract is ratified*. We have every reason to believe that the carriers will continue to attack us in both national handling and in “on-property” bargaining in the months and years ahead. And because the unions that represent engineers and conductors settled before the others this time, in the next round the carriers are likely to settle contracts first with the non-ops, and then proceed to pummel the operating crafts. The prize for the carriers here of course is single employee operating crews.

So, how do we resist the carriers’ offensive? We must start taking a long-term strategic approach to bargaining. Here is what we believe to be a general prescription to win a good contract:

1 - The rail unions should immediately seek to merge and form one united Organization. Barring that, they must create a SINGLE Bargaining Coalition under the banner that “An injury to One is an Injury to All!” and “No union settles until ALL settle”.

2 - The unions must poll ALL rank & file members well in advance to determine what the membership is ready, willing and able to fight for. The forms must ask the members not just what their issues are, but what actions they are willing to take to win those demands.

3 - Each local union must be assisted and trained to form a team (not dissimilar to the BMWED’s CAT plan) to get their members informed, organized, and ready to act.

4 - The Bargaining Team should be elected by the rank & file and consist – to the degree possible – of rank & file members who live and work under the contracts that they negotiate. This way, the team itself has a personal interest in the outcome of the bargaining process.

5 - The Bargaining Team must issue regular updates and bulletins to keep the members informed and motivated. The practice of waiting until the last minute to spring a negotiated settlement on uninformed members must end.

6 - When the Bargaining Team is unable to make progress in bargaining, the network is activated and pressure is applied by the rank & file. This can take the form of leafletting, informational picketing, petitions, letter writing, letters to the editor, appearances at stock holders meetings, protests at CEO’s residences, etc.

7 - If the carriers resist, then tactics must be escalated in the form of “practice strikes”, arm bands, buttons, and other actions at work, all which are designed to build solidarity, prepare the workforce for further action, and put the carriers on notice that the membership is ready, willing and organized to fight.

8 - When a tentative agreement is reached, members must be presented with an honest assessment of the Contract. Pros and cons must be presented by the bargaining team. Presentations, Q&A sessions and other forums must be conducted so that the rank & file can make a fully informed decision. Plenty of time must be allocated for ratification.

9 - The security of the secret ballot must be assured so that members do not feel intimidated when they vote.

10 - Once the contract is ratified, the bargaining process must immediately begin again. A full assessment of what went well, what did not go well, and what needs to be done in the future is necessary. In doing so, the bargaining process will be made even more effective in the next bargaining round.

RWU'S COMMITMENT

To conclude, RWU is opposed to concessionary agreements with the rail carriers. Given the nature of the current bargaining agreement, we can only conclude that it is, in fact, a concessionary agreement, although admittedly, there have been far worse in recent decades. If our unions cannot improve - or at minimum maintain - the current standard of living and working conditions for their members, then these organizations will become increasingly irrelevant in our lives. These archaic and divided craft unions have outlived their usefulness and must be reformed or replaced. Railroad Workers United is committed to a *united* bargaining strategy which is built upon an open, democratic process that begins and ends with rank & file railroaders.