

Track Workers Take the Lead in Protesting the Rail Carriers' Greed!

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On November 8th, members of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees Division (BMWED), a division of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), participated in a national Informational Picket, or as some were calling it, a "practice strike". Joined by various other crafts, this action was in response to the railroads' unwillingness to bargain in good faith and their refusal to negotiate fair wage increases and healthcare benefits for the membership, despite the evidence of a union proposal which included potential savings of over \$100 to the healthcare plan. For the last two years, the union has been building membership participation and action in the fight for a fair contract, with the help of its Communication Action Team (CAT), made up of rank & file members across the nation.

I had the honor to organize the picket at Calumet Yard in Chicago and assisted with various other pickets in Chicagoland and Northern Indiana. While picketing, I came to the realization that our action was taking place in the same neighborhood of the Pullman Strike of 1894, led by Eugene V. Debs, founder of the American Railway Union (ARU). While it would be insane to compare the picket to the deadly wildcat strike that swept across the nation involving 250,000 workers in 27 states, and causing \$80 million in damage, I cannot help but find a few similarities in the struggles of today's rail unions.

The Pullman Company, a manufacturer of railway cars, thought it would be a good idea to have a company town and require the workers to live there, while also charging them rent to boost the company's profits. It was referred to as a "model community", filled with contented and well-paid workers. It all went to hell when Pullman - in response to a deep recession - imposed massive layoffs and wage cuts while maintaining the high rents. A committee of workers tried to negotiate wages, rent, the poor living conditions, and a decrease in the hated 16-hour workdays. Pullman refused to meet with them and instead fired a few of the committee members. Immediately following, the workers voted to strike. The company refused to receive any communication from the newly formed American Railway Union, that had agreed to take up the cause of the strikers. The strike spread and eventually federal troops were brought in to crush the rebellion. During the course of the strike, 30 strikers were killed and 57 were wounded.

Things that I find interesting 123 years later are:

- Railroads are still firing and laying off workers and destroying families to boost profits.
- With record profits, railroads are still trying to charge workers more for benefits.
- The railroads still refuse to bargain in good faith.
- Wage increases do not keep up with inflation or the costs of benefit increases.
- The railroads have effectively pitted unions against each other.
- Some union officials wine and dine, golf, and accept gifts from the railroads as if they are best buddies.
- During the Pullman strike, all crafts joined together to boycott Pullman Cars. Rail unions seldom join together in such fashion today.

- Many rail union members no longer stick together.
- Today, some union members will cross a picket line without inquiring as to who is picketing and why.
- One union has called another union "anti-union." I can't even comprehend the hypocrisy of this statement.

Here are a few principles that as rail union members we should strive to abide by. As rail union members we should be calling for the unity of all rail crafts and an end to inter-union conflicts. This inter-union fighting has gone far enough. When the unions fight one another, the railroads win. There are 32 railroads in one coalition (the NCCC) and 13 unions in 3 coalitions. I wonder who's going to win that one? A better example for railroad workers and their unions to follow is the *All Rail Craft Coalition* (ARCC) in Kansas City, that is putting aside craft differences to join together to build power within rail labor. You guys rock!

We should be building membership participation and action. Sadly, the average union member has remained uninformed, uninterested and uninvolved. In order to effectively stand up to the carriers, we must overcome this cynicism, apathy and despair of the ranks, and build in its place a union of inspired, educated, and active members who are willing to take action on the job in defense of our jobs and our unions.

At the November 8th picket we had only one rail worker stop to see what it was all about, as he wouldn't cross our line until we assured him that it was informational, and went on to explain our purpose. My understanding is that informational picketing of this nature was common practice 20 years ago. It is referred to as SOLIDARITY, the literal meaning of which is: "Unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest; mutual support within a group". It is time we returned to the labor standard of "An injury to One is an Injury to All!" Only when we stand up for each other, go to bat for each other, and take action on the job in defense of each other, will we have a strong union.



The All Rail Crafts Coalition stands united in Kansas City on November 8th. As railroad workers come to see the existing craft unions as hopelessly divided and ineffective, groups like ARCC are popping up and attracting members of the different crafts and unions to come together as one in an effort to win.