

What Can the Rank & File do About the Sad State of Rail Labor?

I've never been much of a social media person, but a few months ago I began to venture out into that brave new world of the RWU Facebook (FB) page. WOW! That was smack dab in the middle of the raging debate over, what at the time was, the tentative "national" agreement. There was a lot going on there and I'd like to weigh in on the major recurring themes. Even though the final vote totals could imply otherwise, judging by the discussion on our FB page, it's fair to say that very few rails were jumping up and down, urinating in their pants with unrestrained excitement over this agreement. Most of those advocating for a "yes" vote were doing so because they didn't want to roll the dice on the usual gun-to-the-head threat of a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB), that has accompanied every round of national bargaining since I started paying attention in the early 1980's. The scripted proclamation by our union leaders whenever a tentative agreement is reached generally goes something like this: "It's not as good as we would like, but it's the best we can get at this time. We strongly recommend a "yes" vote because we don't want to take our chances with a third party (arbitration) or a PEB." At the risk of plagiarizing myself, it sounds like a parrot with a limited attention span that's trapped in a room with a broken record. I've heard that so often I can repeat it in my sleep, 100 times over, blindfolded with both hands tied behind my back!

I'm going to try to say this loud enough to cut thru the noise that dominated our FB page, with the "yays" vs "nays" and liberal Democratic @#\$\$ vs. Trump loving Republican @#\$\$ yelling at each other. Without the right to withhold our labor when all else fails, what is commonly referred to as "collective bargaining" is, in reality, nothing more than "collective begging". In defending the status quo terms of engagement which include, but are not limited to, the infamous Railway Labor Act (RLA), the union leaders common refrain is, "That's just the way it is". Despite its limited attention span, the parrot knows that saying also. Our union leaders revere the sanctity of the RLA as if it were proclaimed per executive fiat by God Almighty Himself. Some of the worst abuses known to the working class, such as chattel slavery, child labor, long hours in dangerous, non-union, sweatshop conditions for starvation wages have been abolished, at least in some parts of the world, because fighters from previous generations refused to accept, "That's just the way it is". As rough as it can be out there, imagine what it might be like if previous generations had just accepted the status quo without any resistance. The best way to honor fighters from the past, some of whom gave their very lives in struggle for a more dignified existence, is to emulate their examples of resistance. It turns my stomach (and those martyrs most likely turn in their graves) when workers lie down like docile lambs willingly being led to slaughter, wasting our forefathers' past courageous sacrifices.

Another major problem with this recently concluded round of national negotiations was that as usual, rail labor was divided. It could be argued that the 3 bargaining coalitions signify some kind of progress vs 13 different unions negotiating individually, but that's simply BS. Anything less than one united bargaining coalition, of ALL of our unions, negotiating as one solid entity, on the principle that not one union settles until ALL unions settle, lacks even a shred of legitimacy. There isn't

one union leader who can look you in the eye and declare he/she is fighting for your best interests as long as they accept these established terms of engagement. RWU has called for such a national united bargaining coalition from our inception 10 years ago. It's a pretty simple and straight forward concept, and anything less than that is a sham and a fraud. I don't call it a joke because it's no laughing matter. Any union leader/official who does not utilize his/her bully pulpit and publicly demand that ALL rail unions unite to act as one, NOW, from this day forward, is not operating in good faith, in relation to the unions' publicly stated mission to effectively fight for our best interests. This is an indisputable fact, Jack! Railroad workers who continue to willingly accept this fraud, are guilty of aiding and abetting it. "Boo hoo hoo, the company's so mean to us, boo hoo hoo, the unions' not doing anything" isn't going to cut it. It is the responsibility and the duty for every rank & file rail union member to demand that our leadership unite and form a single, indivisible, and powerful coordinated bargaining coalition immediately!

As for all of the vitriol between rails who support the Democratic Party vs those who support the Republican Party, at our 2016 convention, RWU adopted the following resolution covering the controversial topic of electoral politics, which updated a previous resolution from 2012: RWU Resolution on the 2016 Elections – "Whereas, the current two major political parties in the U.S. - the Democrats and the Republicans - are closely aligned with big business, corporations and the wealthy as to be almost indistinguishable from one another; and...Whereas, as a result, organized labor - including rail labor - has few reliable friends in the U.S. government that can be counted on to actually stand up for working people and unions; and...Whereas, each election cycle, workers are all too often reduced to voting for "the lesser of two evils" as a result of this two-party corporate monopoly of our political system; Therefore, Be it Resolved that RWU calls for working people and their organizations - together with community groups, environmental organizations, consumer advocates, and others - to break with the two-party corporate dominated political system and explore other avenues, including, but not limited to, the founding of a new political party in order to achieve our goals.

Having debated pro-Democratic and pro-Republican coworkers since I first became aware of the need to break from the two-party con game back in 1980, I am more convinced than ever that far more unites us than divides us. We must decisively reject the narrative of the bosses, the politicians, and at times, the union leaders, as divisive and counterproductive if not fraudulent, and get on with the task of effectively crafting the unity and solidarity that is so urgently needed now, more than ever.

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