Applying the Lessons from this National Bargaining Round

In the Nov/Dec 2017 issue of “Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen’s News”, BLET President Dennis Pierce penned an article entitled, “Applying the Lessons from this Bargaining Round.” In it, he pointed to some lessons learned throughout the course of bargaining. Astutely, he noted that, “the BLE, now BLET and the UTU, now SMART-TD, were faulted for years for not working together, but we changed that dynamic in this contract round.” Brother Pierce understands that the unity of the operating crafts was essential in this last round and will continue to be in future contract negotiations. He also stated that, “I heard loud and clear that the railroads’ callous treatment of their employees has reached an all-time high.” He opined that, “We are closer and closer to a return to the days of the railroad ‘Robber Barons’ when the nation’s railroads ran roughshod not only over their employees, but over the very general population that they serve and profit from.” He continues, “Knowing all of this leads me to what we can do. First it is more important now than ever that Rail Unions move forward working together to protect the interests of their collective memberships.”

To the rank & file, these words are music to the ears! For Railroad Workers United – an organization that has championed rail labor unity and the formation of a universal bargaining coalition for a decade now – such words from one of the myriad craft union leaders are not taken lightly. We see the formation of a universal bargaining coalition as perhaps the single most pressing issue facing rail labor today, because from there, all else flows. And we see the lack of such unity in this last round – as always – as a huge impediment to winning the best possible contract. It is the elephant in the room. The lack of such universal unity is what allowed the Teamster Rail Conference affiliates - BLET and BMWED – to verge on hysterical opposition to one another in November. And it is the reason that we are relatively powerless each and every time we go to the bargaining table, and why time after time, session after session, one union or another, or one “coalition” or another stabs others in the back, settles for a contract, and leaves our fellow railroad brothers and sisters out in the cold.

So while we agree with Brother Pierce, and appreciate those lessons learned, we must immediately undertake the process of building a far greater degree of unity for the upcoming round of bargaining. Pierce rightly identifies the most important development of this last round; i.e., the unity of the operating crafts and their unions. Without a doubt, this is a major step in the right direction. Yet, we cannot ignore the glaring contradictions and pathetic failures of this bargaining round:

1 – Instead of a powerful single universal bargaining coalition, there were three irrational and disparate formations.
2 – The Teamster affiliates – two of the largest rail unions – did not bargain together, and in fact led the name calling, back biting and bickering between and among the various unions.
3 – SMART, the new union that loudly trumpeted the idea of rail labor unity upon its consecration nearly a decade ago, divided itself into two, the Transportation Department in one coalition and the Mechanical Department in another. Even more absurd, the Transportation side of the union made coalition with one of the Teamster affiliates (BLET), while the Mechanical side found a partner with the other (BMWED)!!
4 – The shop crafts completely divided their energy, and scattered themselves as part of all three coalitions, squandering their potential unity and power.
5 – When it came time to vote on the proposed tentative agreement, the unions of the Coordinated Bargaining Group voted on different schedules, out of synch with one another. And when the Boilermakers (IBBO) voted down the agreement, there was no provisions by which the coalition “partners” would stand by this craft.
6 – Based upon #5 above, it is apparent that these coalitions were limited in value in terms of achieving real power. Coalitions that are not predicated upon the notion that an injury to one is an injury to all, and agree that no one settle until all settle, are relatively impotent at the end of the day.

Unfortunately, President Pierce did not address these failings nor offer concrete and tangible solutions to prevent such weaknesses in future rounds of bargaining. So, we will. First, as Pierce does imply - but does not actually state - the only really effective coalition of rail labor is one of all unions, all crafts, all workers. Period. Second, the Teamster affiliates must put aside their differences and rebuild the moral authority – if there ever was any – of the Teamster Rail Conference, which alone has the ability to move the universal concept forward. Without IBT unity, it will be very difficult to bring rail labor together. Third, SMART must act like a union that it professes to be in the next round and bargain together as a union. Fourth, the shop crafts must learn the lessons of history, and understand that only together will these scattered union fragments have any power. Once numbering more than half a million, together they account for no more than 25,000 rail workers today. Finally, this coalition – to be truly effective – must stand behind one another. When it is time to vote on a Tentative Agreement, all railroaders must cast their ballots on the same schedule. If and when one or more of the affiliates votes it down, then we go back to the bargaining table – as a group. Yes it will be tough, but there is no other way. This is what it means to be a union. Then and only then, will we achieve the power that we must have in order to win - if and when we resort to “self-help”. Then and only then, will the carriers respect us and realize they can no longer play one craft or group off against another. Then and only then, can we hold our heads high as dignified railroad workers – UNITED!!

| RWU has rolled out these buttons and stickers and plans to be ready for the next round of bargaining, which will commence in Fall of 2019. The unions must start today and plan for a unified and effective strategy to win a good contract for all. Avoid the rush and order yours now at the RWU online Store. See the RWU website. |