Missouri Voters Make Their Voices Heard: No Right-to-Work!

The Missouri legislature was dealt a severe setback, as was the national “Right-to-Work” campaign when Missouri voters overwhelmingly rejected legislation adopted earlier this year, voting down the bill by a 2-to-1 margin in an August 7th referendum. Under Missouri law, if 100,000 signatures are collected challenging a new law, the measure then goes directly before the voters. The anti-worker legislation would have prevented unions from signing contracts that require all workers to pay for union representation, effectively allowing employees to opt out of paying dues while retaining all the benefits of union membership.

RWU Steering Committee member and railroad machinist Will Young from the front lines: “I am proud to report from a state, smack-dab in the middle of the USA, that has overwhelmingly rejected the “Right to Work” social cancer. This latest attempt to effectively kill organized labor and workers’ rights here in Missouri was met head-on by a joint effort of the working class in general to send a message that Missouri is a proud union state. Kudos to the BMWED for allocating resources to the fight; and letting a lone machinist tag along in canvassing efforts. Rail Labor taking action for the betterment of the whole ... how it should be!”

Iowa Railroad Conference Tackles Safety, Technology, Solidarity

Each year, the Iowa State Legislative Board of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen holds a Health & Safety Conference. This year the annual conference was held in Iowa City at the University of Iowa Labor Center on September 5/6th. The curriculum, developed with the help of Iowa’s only public university Labor Center, focused on member education on a wide variety of subjects including labor history, changing technologies in the workplace, federal agencies and their impact on rail unions, and rail labor unity and solidarity.

The Iowa BLET Legislative Board was privileged to host keynote speaker Jordan Barab, the former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety & Health (OSHA, 1999-2017). While his safety expertise falls outside the scope of rail labor, Barab’s keen interest in worker safety led him to create a worker safety blog at Jordanbarab.com and educate himself on the Lac-Mégantic rail disaster in Quebec in 2013. In his presentation, he highlighted the importance of questioning “Why?” in response to workplace tragedies. In other words, while agencies and company officials settle on blaming worker behaviors, Barab stresses asking, “Why did the employee take this or that particular course of action?” The question almost always leads to a root cause which exposes the fact that companies, such as rail carriers, cut corners on safety and encourage “normalized deviance”; that is, the egregious worker behavior almost always goes unquestioned by bosses, until a catastrophic failure occurs. At that point, the individual worker is blamed.

Joe Dolan, a law firm accident investigator shared his knowledge of drone monitoring technology, now employed by Union Pacific Railroad, and how to use the carrier’s own rules in an investigation, should the need arise. He also shared how his law firm is employing drones to defend railroad workers whom they represent against the carriers.

University of Iowa Labor Center employee Paul Iversen, a longtime union member, labor organizer and educator, assisted with his knowledge of rail labor history and the current federal administrative agencies, such as the National Mediation Board and the Federal Railroad Administration.

Capping off the conference were three guests highlighting cross-craft unity efforts in Kansas City. Machinists member and RWU Co-Chair Aaron Dixon joined BMWED members Carey Dall and Matt Mortensen to share their experiences in cross-craft organizing, and how bridging the gap between the craft unions is our best defense against the carriers’ divide & conquer tactics.

Without the Labor Center, hosting an annual conference would be increasingly challenging. It is a critical defender of workers in the state of Iowa, the Midwest and across the country. But the Labor Center is under attack by the University President, the Board of Regents and reactionary state politicians who seek to further erode Labor’s ability to defend workers in a right-to-work state. Founded in 1951, the Center has assisted the Iowa BLET Legislative Board to hold this annual conference since 2011. For more information, or to take action to help save the Labor Center, go to saveourlaborcenter.com or call University of Iowa Law School Dean Kevin Washburn at 319-384-4658, and University President Bruce Harreld at 319-335-3549. Tell them to keep the Labor Center open.