UK Railroaders and their Unions Fight to Keep the Guard

Creative Tactics to Win the Struggle for Two-Person Crews

North American railroad workers can learn a few lessons from their counterparts in the United Kingdom, where the unions of the operating crafts – the Rail, Marine & Transport Workers Union (RMT) and the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers & Firemen (ASLEF) – have been battling attempts by the various rail carriers in England, Scotland, and Wales, to introduce “driver only operations” (DOO) over the course of the last few years. While the fight is very different in some respects from the one in North America to maintain the road conductor and the two-person crew, there are many similarities. The fight in the UK is one aboard passenger trains, while that in the U.S. is currently focused aboard freight trains. But ultimately, both struggles are, at their core, about proper and adequate staffing in order to maintain safe, secure, and efficient train operations.

Public Outreach

The RMT has invested time and energy in building a campaign to win the hearts and minds of the general public. Many citizens travel by train and the union has direct access to them to make their case for the Guard (conductor). The union has produced a slick color booklet that meticulously outlines the role of the Guard, the safety sensitive functions of the job, and why it is so important to keep this essential worker on the train. The booklet clearly outlines the role of the Guard, recounts a series of passenger/train interfaces, lists events where the role of the Guard made a difference in derailments, collisions and other accidents, in both historic times and in recent years.

The union has also produced and distributed a series of videos, including “Unguarded”, a compilation of citizen testimony of what rail travel is like on trains where the Guard has been eliminated, and the accompanying dangers and insecurities, including assaults, fights, mechanical failures, and the difficulties experienced by disabled travelers. In addition, the RMT has launched a Twitter Campaign to #KeepTheGuardOnTheTrain. To brand their message clearly for the public, the union has promoted a slogan, “Your Guard Means Safe, Secure, and Accessible Trains for All of Us.”

Given the similarities to our struggle on the other side of the Atlantic, perhaps railroad workers and our unions could put forward a similar campaign to win public support. It is high time that an official document was produced – ideally as a joint collaboration of the operating crafts unions – that, like the RMT booklet, explains the role of the conductor on a freight train, the importance to safe operations, and the dangers inherent in single crew operations. Like the RMT document, this one could list countless incidents over the years where the conductor made a dramatic difference in either preventing disaster or remediating the aftermath of one. And while they are at it, the unions could produce a video to the same effect, and promote it on the internet, on U-Tube, elsewhere and email a link to all their members urging the broadest possible circulation. And we could jointly sponsor – together with community groups, environmental organizations, pro-rail organizations and other labor unions – rail safety conferences similar to those that RWU sponsored a few years ago, that drew hundreds of community and environmental activists, and served to educate thousands of the need for a two-person crew aboard freight trains. And perhaps it is time for the U.S. rail unions to take up a similar slogan to the RMT’s, something on the order of: “The Conductor Means Safe, Secure and Efficient Movement of Trains for all of Us.”

National Petition Drive

This fall a petition drive was initiated, not by the union but by a 16-year-old. Ben Spiers set up a petition to keep the safety-critical Guard on the train and it has gone viral. The RMT has endorsed the young man’s effort and has promoted this surprising development. Under British law, the government must now compose a response to the young man and all those who have signed the petition. With our allies in the community, the unions on this side of the Atlantic need not wait and see if such a drive is initiated, but rather, we could launch such a petition anytime on the question of single employee train crew operations.

Outreach to the Greater Labor Movement

Labor Party leader Jeremy Corbyn joined conductors on the picket line on Day 35 of their strike against Northern Rail. Other unions have also come to the aid and assistance of the RMT. On this side of the Atlantic, we need to employ the same strategy, building solidarity with other transport workers unions and other unions around general safety issues. And imagine the publicity we could get by having a national political figure, say Bernie Sanders, to come walk a picket line with us on the issue of single employee train crews!

Strike Action

At the end of the day, while courting public opinion, building alliances and doing outreach to other labor unions and the community is important to win our fight, ultimately the struggle comes down to industrial action, without which – or at least the threat of – the rail carriers remain firmly in the saddle. The RMT in the UK has engaged in numerous strikes over the last few years that have revolved around the crucial issue of the Guard. At Merseyrail, the union conducted 16 strike days over an 18-month campaign and won. At Greater Anglia, the union struck for 12 days and won. Victories have also come at Arriva Wales and ScotRail. The struggle continues at Northern Rail and Southwestern Railway.

Conclusion

In order to win the fight for the two-person crew, we have to take the bull by the horns. We cannot simply wait for our enemies to launch their attack, but rather, we need to be proactive, preparing and readying ourselves for the inevitable showdown. And when the battle is on, we make use of all tactics at our disposal. We think creatively, we take risks, we seek out allies, we proudly tell our side of the story, and most importantly, we make it clear to the rail carriers that we refuse to accept anything less than the two person crew – a certified engineer and a certified conductor - aboard every train in North America!