RWU Launches Nationwide Campaign for Rail Labor Unity in Bargaining

In mid-September, RWU launched a Petition for Rail Union Unity, designed to help raise awareness of the issue, build solidarity among all rail workers, and to demand that our rail union officials do the right thing and stick together as one in bargaining in the upcoming round of contract negotiations. According to RWU Co-Chair Ross Grooters, “With the bargaining process at the national level set to get underway on November 1st, RWU believes that a single coalition of all rail labor is imperative if we hope to win a good contract.”

The introduction to the online petition states that, “For too long, rail labor has been fragmented and divided. Today, in the face of ‘Precision Scheduled Railroading’, mass layoffs and furloughs, carrier threats to run trains with a single crew member, attacks on health care and vital work rules, it is imperative that all rail crafts and all rail unions stand together in bargaining. Let your voice be heard and sign the petition!” The Petition has been emailed out to thousands of railroad workers, is being circulated on Facebook, and is available on the RWU website. Rails who have not seen it yet are urged to read it over and to add your name to the list.

The Petition itself states: “We, the undersigned, rank & file railroaders - working, furloughed, and retired - urge the elected officials of our respective rail unions to stand together in contract bargaining, and to unite as one universal bargaining coalition of all rail crafts, based on the premise that no union settles until all settle.” While the Petition is geared towards obtaining individual signatures from rank & file union railroad workers, locals and lodges and even General Committees are encouraged to sign the petition as well. According to RWU General Secretary Ron Kaminkow, “This petition is for all union rail workers in the U.S. We believe this simple demand encapsulates the wishes of the overwhelming majority of us. It is time we came together and closed ranks, both operating crafts and the non-operating crafts as well, and stand shoulder to shoulder in contract bargaining with the carriers. RWU encourages rails and locals to sign on and make a strong statement to every rail union official. It’s time for unity!”

Since rail labor first began organizing into unions 150 years ago, we have been divided by craft into a myriad of different unions. As long ago as the 1890s, forward thinking rail union leaders and rank & file unionists alike have understood that the “craft union” system was more often serving the interests of the rail carriers as opposed to the workers themselves. One union would launch a strike, only to be undercut or even scabbed on by another. This led to the formation of the American Railway Union (ARU) in 1893, the nation’s first “industrial union”, a labor organization that welcomed all workers in the same industry into its ranks. While extremely popular among the rank & file and very effective at winning demands, the ARU experiment was short lived, broken the following year by a combination of rail carriers, government, and craft unions, who all joined forces to destroy it.

Nevertheless, the desire for unity among railroad workers has continued since that time. Numerous caucuses and coalitions - including Railroad Workers United - have emerged in the hopes of unifying some or all of rail labor over the decades. In 2017, the All Rail Crafts Coalition attempted to unite railroad workers in an attempt to win a good contract in the last round of national bargaining. And since that time, no fewer than three national unions - BLET, BMWED and IAM - have adopted Convention Resolutions that endorse and support the idea of a single bargaining coalition of all rail labor. Organizers of The Petition for Rail Union Unity hope to garner thousands of signatures from union railroad workers across the United States, from all carriers, all crafts and all unions. Local unions are invited to sign on as well, and all signatories are encouraged to bring the Petition to their local union meeting for endorsement. Rails may also wish to circulate a paper copy to garner the signatures of union members who are not oriented to the internet. You can gain their signatures, and then enter the data into the online petition yourself. Just make sure you explain and have their permission.

“This is simply basic trade unionism that we are advocating,” states RWU Treasurer Hugh Sawyer. “Railroad workers - whether in freight or passenger service, in the shop, on the track, or on the train, Class One or short line service, yard or road - share a common interest in terms of wages, benefits and working conditions. They need to be united into a common umbrella when we go into contract bargaining. The big rail carriers have the National Carriers Conference Committee (NCCC). We need to have a united presence at the table as well.”

Check the RWU website or Facebook Page. See the Petition at: https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/petition-for-rail-union-unity/