“Those Who Cannot Learn from History Are Doomed to Repeat It” - Part 1

We’ve all heard this quote or some variation of it over the years. Perhaps many of us have heard it so often that we inadvertently become indifferent to the true essence of the concept. Recent events in the current news cycle reinforced to me just how critical and essential it is for the working class to conquer this concept, so that it becomes part of our moral, intellectual and ideological DNA. For the sake of accuracy, there are several variations of the above quote, attributed to the European philosopher/writer, George Santayana. This may not be the original verbatim verbiage, but my intent here is to focus on the content, the need to study and learn our history. Only with a thorough understanding of where we’ve come from, are we able to put our present conditions into an accurate context, in order to most effectively chart our course for the future.

So what the hell does any of this have to do with rails trying to draw a battle line in the sand against single-employee crews as more and more of us are being tortured by the implementation of Precision Scheduled Railroading? Glad you asked. The short answer is one of the basic reasons for RWU’s existence: A major contributing factor to the carriers’ ability to effortlessly eviscerate our working conditions, dignity, safety, quality of life and off the job over the last few decades is the fact that we remain divided into 13 different craft unions. This is an insult to our intelligence and every rail should be outraged. They play rail labor like chumps, manipulating divisions in crafts, properties, terminals, etc. On our website, www.railroadworkersunited.org, in addition to current news and analysis, you’ll find the archives of The Highball. There’s a wealth of informative and educational articles and commentaries that unfortunately stand the test of time. Check out the “General Info for Railroaders” link on the left, which leads to the history and legacy of Eugene Debs, founder of the American Railway Union (ARU) in 1893.

For newer readers, the “cliff notes” synopsis: The ARU’s mission was to organize ALL railroad workers into ONE industrial union, the first such union in labor’s history. Rails signed up in droves, sometimes at the rate of 2,000 a week. At its peak, the ARU had more members than the combined total of all the existing craft brotherhoods. The ARU’s first challenge was against the Great Northern. After a 3-week strike, rail labor had its first victory. The 1894 Pullman Strike evolved into a major battle throughout the country. The ARU was winning on the picket lines, and had overwhelming support in the working class, but was ultimately crushed by the federal militia. At least two dozen were killed, with several dozen more injured. Several ARU leaders, including Debs, were imprisoned, their supporters blacklisted and forever banished from the industry. 125 years later we remain divided as the carriers slobber all over themselves in glee. A little known fact is that leaders of the existing craft brotherhoods at the time - which would evolve into our existing unions of today - encouraged their members, sometimes ordering them to cross the ARU’s picket lines. So, in essence, the existing brotherhoods were utilized as a strikebreaking apparatus, to assist the carriers in crushing the ARU. Isn’t that special?

So how does this brief history lesson apply to our plight today? Armed with this history and the fact that very little has changed, placing blind faith and trust in our existing institutions, as they are currently constituted, to effectively defend us from the carriers’ relentless assaults, is tactical suicide. We must pressure and challenge from within, to whatever extent possible. But nothing less than an educated, organized, mobilized, inspired, determined and confident rank & file will suffice to effectively challenge the bosses and the politicians that support and enable them - Democrats and Republicans - while sweeping aside ineffective leadership along the way.

Over the years, I’ve been given props for my stream-of-consciousness rant-and-rages in these pages and various public forums. I’m grateful and humbled, especially to whatever extent I’ve been able to inspire my peers. But once upon a time, I was just a hot-mess “rebel without a clue”. In the late 1970’s, I began to develop some union consciousness, getting active in my fireman’s local, as the bosses were flagrantly violating our contract, while also transfixed by Solidarnosc, the uprising of the Polish working class. What started as an industrial skirmish in the Gdansk shipyards evolved into a broad social movement, as the workers utilized their economic power to champion the just demands of society. Since we’re robbed of our history, that was the first time I’d ever heard of a general strike, though the first such strike was actually 100 years earlier, led by my forefathers in the industry I was working in. “Hot damn, what a great idea! We need to try something like that here.” Yet simultaneously, as the Democratic mayor was trying to break the striking Chicago Firefighters Union, I lapped up the media’s narrative that, “...those greedy workers are putting the public at risk by extorting the city to cave in to their selfish demands…”, hook-line-and-sinker. Fortunately, I soon encountered some veteran activists/fighters for social justice on the job, who opened my eyes to just how much I needed to learn. We have a responsibility to seek out the truth and facts about our history. Little to none is taught in school or found in the mainstream media. While we’re at it, we need to educate ourselves on economics, because that drives everything from our conditions on and off the job, to politics, the environment and foreign policy.

As this issue goes to press, Asarco, one of the world’s major copper producers, is trying to bust the USW copper miners in Arizona. In 1983, when the union struck Phelps Dodge, the AZ Democratic, “friend-of-labor” governor had the National Guard break the strike and the union. “Those who cannot learn from history…”

To be Continued in the Next Issue

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