The INVEST in America Act: A Golden Opportunity for Alliance Building

By forwarding the INVEST in America Act, Rep. Peter DeFazio — Chair of the House Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure — has handed us a unique opportunity to build an enduring alliance of rail workers and their unions; environmental and community organizations; and rail advocacy groups. The legislation offers us the chance to push this idea forward with renewed vigor. At last, here is something tangible — the INVEST in America Act. Yet none of these objectives can be obtained by a single group or organization acting alone. We need the broadest possible unity and solidarity if we hope to prevail.

Over the course of the last six years, RWU has attempted to build this external coalition, encouraging rail unions and various organizations to come together around issues of mutual concern. The INVEST legislation offers us the chance to push this idea forward with renewed vigor. At last, here is something tangible — the INVEST in America Act.

With the nation and the world in the throes of protest and social unrest, working class people are on the move, their minds being opened to new ideas. A new social movement is brewing. Things like The Green New Deal, Health Care for All, guaranteed employment, a living wage for all, police accountability, high-speed rail — in a matter of months — are suddenly on the agenda, together with the INVEST in America legislation. Yet none of these objectives can be obtained by a single group or organization acting alone. We need the broadest possible unity and solidarity if we hope to prevail.

In 2014, after rail workers defeated the drive for single crew operations on BNSF, Railroad Workers United (RWU) embarked upon a campaign for rail safety, where we took various safety issues to the public. Together with dozens of community and environmental groups, we presented a vision of a safer railroad around a number of issues, including but not limited to: adequate train crew size, limits to long and heavy trains, safety restrictions on the movement of hazardous materials including explosive “bomb trains,” an end to train crew fatigue, and proper scheduling of train crews. In doing so, we began the process of building enduring relationships with countless individuals and organizations. And while we maintain our autonomy and they maintain theirs as well, we stick to our agenda as they do to theirs, we all came together around a common theme — railroad safety. We do not have to agree on everything. We reserve the right to differ with one another. This of course, is the basis for any coalition.

In 2017, RWU formally joined a number of groups that were dedicated to preserving, protecting and expanding passenger rail service. We joined the Rail User Network (RUN) and also the Rail Passengers Association (RPA). We have close ties with regional groups including RailPAC of California and Nevada. Like our efforts to work with environmental and community groups, this effort serves likewise to introduce rail workers and our issues to these potential allies, and to gain insight, wisdom, and resources from them as well. It is a two-way street. And in building these relationships, all of us and our organizations gain strength and power, which is what we need to successfully take on the corporations and the rich and powerful.

Both of the above efforts are examples of what are called “external coalitions”. As opposed to “internal coalitions”, which consist of people who are already part of a group, such as a trade union, formed at the workplace in order to more effectively defend workers’ interests, “external coalitions” base their confidence in gaining credibility on inviting non-traditional partners who wish to attain the same end goal, but the reasons to achieve these goals differ. For example, when we work with our partners in the advocacy and environmental communities, we all wish to attain the same end goal (a safer, more efficient railroad), but for a broad array of reasons, including more rail employment, worker/community safety and protection, more trains, better passenger service, less pollution, etc.

RWU hopes to build upon these alliances and to strengthen our relationships with our coalition partners in the months and years ahead. We encourage all RWU members — and all railroad workers and union officials — to join one of the various rail advocacy groups — either local or national — and become an active member. Your knowledge of worker and rail issues will be a welcome addition. In taking part, you assist their efforts for more and better trains, and help ensure that they do not support such developments at the expense of rail workers’ jobs, safety, and conditions of employment. Likewise, we encourage you to join groups like Sierra Club and Green Peace. Vocalize your support for environmental issues, and explain why rail workers livelihoods, safety, and working conditions must not be compromised in the noble and critically important pursuit of a greener economy.

The INVEST in America Act would provide increased funding for passenger rail, and transit, and mandate certain requirements and reforms for Amtrak and rail freight service. For rail workers, the Act contains a “wish list” of many provisions we have been fighting to achieve. For passengers, the Act contains numerous provisions that our Advocacy partners have been pushing for. And for community and environmental activists, the Act would provide for a safer and environmentally oriented rail system in the U.S. As such, the Act provides a golden opportunity for all of these forces to work together.