Railroad Brothers & Sisters: Why Do We Put Up with This?!

As this issue of The Highball goes to press, we are saying good riddance to 2020 and cautiously welcoming 2021. Regular readers of my quarterly, incendiary rants know that my righteous indignation runs at a constant fever pitch on a good day, but with recent current events, my head feels like it’s on the verge of exploding, I keep asking myself, “Why do we put up with this?!” That theme is the logical question posed by the four main bullet points at the conclusion of my commentary in the Fall 2020 issue titled, “Workers Need to Look Beyond Trump vs. Biden for our Salvation.” To summarize, I attempted to make the case that the working class needs to contemplate the possibility that we are being shamelessly conned by the major entities that run society. I listed what I consider to be four fundamental myths that, at the very least, need to be questioned.

Three months later it’s more important than ever that we stop allowing politicians, mainstream media talking heads and even our own union officials too effortlessly control the narrative. More than ever it’s imperative that we begin to think for ourselves, question and do our own research on the economic and political power structures that essentially control every aspect of our lives. We need to discuss the role of our unions, especially the rank & file, from the past - to the present - to the future.

The article on page 7, “An Open Letter to President-Elect Joe Biden from RWU”, makes reference to how the government has critical, decisive impact on the safety, dignity and quality of life on and off the job for railroad workers. From safety regulations - or lack thereof - to the constant threat of a Presidential Emergency Board, our struggles compel us to question, much less challenge and confront, our political institutions, in addition to evil, profit-driven bosses.

Since each issue of The Highball has a shelf life of three months, it’s difficult to comment on immediate current events. A lot can happen in the next three months. These days one needs to keep a bag of popcorn handy for the constantly evolving theater-of-the-absurd. Nonetheless, I’m going to make an exception. By the time you’re reading this issue, in theory, Joe Biden will have been sworn in as President, in spite of the planned hissy fit by Trump and his lackeys to disrupt the imminent Electoral College certification. Regular readers of my commentaries know that I’m no fan of Democratic Party politicians either, but these Republicans are really something else.

As a rebellious teen in the early 1970s, I got into learning the history of our founding fathers’ war of independence against England, the birth of our nation and studying the constitution. Simultaneously I was livid with then President Nixon’s flagrant assault on that very constitution I was being taught to revere - AKA the Watergate scandal. As offensive as that was, Trump’s futile (hopefully - a lot can happen in three months) attempt to overturn the recent election makes Watergate look like a petty urinary contest. Some pundits have denigrated this spectacle as Trump’s attempted “creeping clown coup” or his traveling “clown show”, but that’s just not fair to the clowns of the world.

Simultaneously Mitch McConnell, leader of the Senate Republican majority, refuses to allow votes on bills that the House has passed to provide even token relief from the economic carnage brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Why do we put up with this? I don’t know anything about the Senate rules except that they obviously have nothing to do with a democratic process when one individual has so much unchecked power. It’s possible some of these bills could pass even in a Republican-controlled Senate, but by not even allowing a vote McConnell shields Republicans from having to go on the record voting against more stimulus relief. Because I’ve been convinced for 40+ years that the working class needs to break from the 2-party political con game, I was never an Obama supporter - nothing personal - just political. But it was still offensive on principle when McConnell openly stated at the beginning of Obama’s 1st term that his sole objective was to make Obama a one term president. Isn’t the government’s publicly stated mission supposed to be about doing what’s in our best interests? Why do we put up with this?!

I have the official book on Roberts Rules of Order (RRoO). It’s about 2 inches thick, but I’ve only got as far as the first 5 pages. So admittedly I’m no expert, but every meeting that I’ve ever participated in was guided by RRoO was an exercise in participatory democracy. This includes every RWU convention I’ve attended over the years, as well as the 2011 and 2014 UTU/SMArT-TD conventions I attended as delegate from my local. So I don’t accept the common narrative that, “Politics is rough business” and that “hardball”, “horse trading”, and “mutual back scratching” (or worse) are simply the norms - the way it is. All I know is that whatever rules they play by in the Senate are crooked as hell.

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It goes without saying that women and minorities are scandalously under-represented in our current political system, but I’ve got nothing against “old white men” per se. A valid case can probably be made that I might qualify for that category. All I know is that when I listen to these vile, arrogant Neanderthals (that’s not fair to Neanderthals), usually Republicans, who are not like us, yet they control our lives, sometimes it’s all I can do to keep from throwing my beer bottle at the TV.

I hear at least one of you saying, “See Mark, that’s why we have to get more Democrats elected.” I concede that the more progressive Democrats have some humanity and raise important social justice issues, just like some union officials. But regardless of how sincere some politicians and/or union officials may be, Debs posed the fundamental litmus test question: Are they effectively fighting for our interests? In my personal opinion, the best, most sincere fighters amongst us will always be limited as long as we accept the enemy’s terms of engagement. The working class’s historical challenge is to establish OUR terms of engagement.

Mark Burrows has served as Organizer and Co-Chair for RWU. He recently retired after hiring out in 1974, working as an engineer for a combined total of 37 years for the C&NW and the Soo Line/CP Rail in Chicago, Illinois. He was SMArT-TD 1433's Delegate for the 2011 & 2014 International Conventions and continues to be an active member of RWU.