Railworkers Need Our Own Playbook

Those who've known me over the years will be the first to agree that my working class hatred for the bosses, CEOs, as well as the politicians that enable and support them, runs at a fever pitch, approaching the proverbial “edge” on a good day. One former coworker (Hi Drew!) would regularly tell me, “Burrows, you've got more issues than a magazine rack.” Hey, I resemble that remark! Fortunately, being active in RWU for the last 10 years, as well as other outlets for social justice over the last 40 years, has sort of worked as a “poor man's” therapy. So as I try to make constructive contributions to our collective struggle for social justice, simultaneously I'm able to halfway manage any potential anger-management flare-ups without professional help. Is this a great country or what?

That's said my equilibrium has been seriously challenged over the last several years. As I look back, I clearly see that the needle began to move closer to the red when Hunter Harrison took over at the Canadian Pacific (CP) in 2012, implementing Precision Scheduled Railroading (PSR) - a new and improved methodology from what he'd established at the Canadian National a couple decades prior. Over the years in previous commentaries, I've described in horrifying detail the reign of terror unleashed, which was exacerbated by the unions' impotence at best, and overt collaboration at worst - compounded by a layer of co-workers buying into the latter.

Though my dear mother, who had a tad of rabble-rouser in her, taught me well too “pick my battles”, there were times in those last few years where I had no choice but to stand up for coworkers and/or myself, as well as safety issues, in the moment, in response to the bosses’ relentless whip-cracking and ramrodding. On a few occasions I know I flirted with the potential death-sentence charge of “insubordination”, and I consider myself lucky to have crawled and limped to the finish line 6 years ago.

I didn't even have a full year to savor my hard-earned liberation from “CP Hell” (a common term-of-endearment) and begin to decompess, then Trump got elected. The rest, as they say is history. In my previous commentary in the Spring 2021 Highball, "Rails Need to Crank Up the Pressure and the Heat on Biden and Co.", I expressed my personal relief, empathizing with what millions of others were feeling, being able to tell the vile, grotesque, repugnant, anti-union, anti-worker monster that he was fired - while simultaneously cautioning against unrealistic expectations from “Uncle Joe” Biden’s administration.

Case in point, as I read the two front page articles in this issue, I just shook my head. The top article describes how SMART-TD is now legally prohibited from even attempting to draw a line in the sand to assert that engineer-only/single-employee-crew operation is simply not up for discussion. While this ruling doesn’t instantly guarantee the dreaded end result, the article clearly lays out plausible scenarios of how this latest development can - and most likely will - ultimately be utilized against us.

This latest insult doesn’t really surprise me. What does continue to mystify me is that railroad workers continue to accept - without any hesitation - an established union structure and leadership that willingly accepts - without any hesitation - the enemy’s (ie: the carriers’) terms of engagement (ToE). Who benefits from the negotiating protocols mandated by the Railway Labor Act (RLA)? How has that worked for us over the years?

Now’s a good a time to plagiarize myself, from my commentary...