The election results this past November in one of the biggest unions in the United States – The 1.3-million-member International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) – were decisive. The Teamsters United slate swept to victory, defeating their rivals 2 to 1 and winning a controlling majority on the union’s 27-seat International Executive Board.

It’s the first time in almost a quarter-century that a coalition backed by the rank-and-file caucus group - Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) - has taken control of the international union, after coming up short in elections since the 1990s, unable to defeat the James Hoffa machine. With Hoffa retiring, the floodgates of discontent opened wide and resulted in new leadership and hopefully, a new direction for the union.

The incoming president, Sean O’Brien, says his top priorities are to unite the rank-and-file to take on employers, organize Amazon and other competitors in the union’s core industries, and withdraw support from politicians who don’t deliver on union demands. Essential to organizing at Amazon or anyplace else, O’Brien argues, is winning enviable contracts for the existing Teamsters. “Our biggest selling point to potential members is showing in black and white what a union contract can do,” he said. “We’ve got to have a grassroots campaign to engage our members working in similar industries and showcase what Teamsters can do – and that means negotiating strong contracts that people want to be part of.”

In UPS negotiations in 2023, he says, the union must abolish the second tier of drivers, raise the starting pay of part-timers from $14 an hour to $20, and crack down on subcontracting and Uber-like deliveries by “personal vehicle drivers.” He and his running mates have pledged to strike UPS if necessary.

In the last elections five years ago, rail labor voted strongly for the opposition slate, in a show of discontent for the status quo. When the two rail unions affiliated with the IBT more than 15 years ago, they were promised better service, better contracts and more power. But many rail Teamsters have not felt the affiliation with the larger union has resulted in much benefit. This time around the two affiliates were split, with the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) membership voting largely for the Teamsters United slate, while the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen (BLET) ranks tended to vote for the Teamster Power slate, largely because the national division President Dennis Pierce was part of that slate. The nearly opposite vote percentages from the two unions reflected the deep divisions and animosity that has existed between the two unions in recent years, despite both being members of the Teamsters Rail Conference (TRC).

How the victory will affect rail labor – particularly the TRC affiliates – BLET and the BMWED remains to be seen. For years, these two labor organizations – despite being under the “umbrella” of the TRC – have been at odds. Their respective leaderships have engaged in a war of words, and in the last few rounds of bargaining, refuse to stand together. Rather, they have sought out other bargaining partners from the myriad rail craft unions.

January 10th, RWU sent a letter of congratulations to the winning slate, offering our services and support, and requesting that – upon assuming office in March – the new leadership do what it can to bring unity to the Rail Conference affiliates. RWU has been campaigning since 2008 for a single bargaining coalition of all rail labor to maximize power and win better contracts. If the BLET and the BMWED were to put aside past squabbles and come together in unity and solidarity, rail workers could see a historic convergence of all of their disparate and fragmented unions. According the RWU General Secretary Ron Kaminkow, “We have high hopes that the new Teamsters’ administration will assist in ushering in a new era of solidarity, unity, and democracy among all rail unions, leading to our long-cherished goal of “One Big Bargaining Coalition.”