Thinking of Running for Union Office? RWU Promotes Some Principled and Effective Positions

The defeat of what may have been the most entrenched and powerful President of a rail union – Dennis Pierce of the BLET – by a working railroader - Edward Hall - one who had never held office above the local union level and had no prior experience in the union bureaucracy - is evidence of the deep level of discontent within the ranks of rail labor. Hall announced his candidacy this past summer, and ran a very limited campaign. Despite lack of name recognition, he won. (For more analysis on this stunning development, see the article on Page 4).

What does a revitalized, rejuvenated rail labor movement and leadership need to look like?

Hall’s victory will no doubt inspire other working railroaders to likewise consider running for office. This is great news for union democracy, membership participation and motivation, new ideas and new directions, all of which are sorely needed in rail labor across all crafts and all unions. But all of this begs a series of questions: What will new leadership bring? What changes must new leadership make in order to move us forward? How can we assure that the “new boss” is not simply the same as the “old boss”? In essence: What does a revitalized, rejuvenated rail labor movement and leadership need to look like?

RWU believes that any union leader must be guided by a principled approach including a commitment to Solidarity, Unity and Democracy. Without such a commitment, we will endlessly swap current, unimaginative, cautious, uncreative and complacent union leaders for a new set every so many years. While we desperately need new leadership in the rail unions, we need leadership that is committed to changing the structure, the perspective and the culture that mitigates towards creating such lousy, do-nothing, go-along-get-along “leadership.” Without these commitments, even the most sincere, noblest aspiring leaders, will inevitably be limited to delivering more of the same.

To these ends, RWU suggests a series of institutional/attitudinal changes that any insurgent candidate wishing to move the union forward must commit to. RWU urges candidate for union office to include the following in their platforms and make a public commitment to the following dozen positions:

1. Supporting a single bargaining coalition of all rail unions, a true coalition, one which is based upon rock solid ironclad solidarity, a coalition predicated upon the idea that no union settles until all settle.

2. Exploring the possibilities of merging with other unions with the ultimate goal of achieving a single union of all rail workers.

3. Supporting one-member-one-vote for all union offices at the local, GCA, and national division levels.

4. Advocating some form of term limits where leadership serves a term or two, rotates back into the craft for a term, and is then eligible to run again. This will keep our union leaders honest and in touch with the membership. They will be more concerned with the contracts they negotiate, and the conditions of employment, if they know they will soon be returning to labor under their terms and conditions for a term (or longer).

5. Advocating some form of provision to work the craft regularly while in office in order to keep in touch with the changing nature of the job and current working conditions of employment and working railroaders.

6. Restricting wages of union officers so they do not exceed the highest annual wage achieved when working in the craft. In addition, no more multiple salaries for union officials. We want union leaders who want to lead, not use the union as a way to self aggrandizement.

7. Modifying union officers’ wage & benefit increases so they are tied to what the members receive through contractual agreements. Leaders need to see themselves, first and foremost, as working rail workers, whose material conditions are predicated upon what the union wins, like every other union member.

8. Creating an open bargaining process where the contract bargaining is brought into the light of day from behind closed doors, where members’ input is essential and they are informed at every step of the process. Bargaining offers us an opportunity to involve the members, to invite them to be part of the process, and to build support and empower the bargaining committee.

9. Involving the membership in the bargaining process by organizing and preparing the ranks before the actual bargaining with the carriers even commences.

10. Forcefully articulating the union’s program and our perspective to the media and the American people. RWU just provided a perfect example of what the unions can do to promote our goals, objectives and our perspective, and win support from other workers, unions, the working class, and society in general.

11. Working in solidarity with other unions, workers’ groups, environmental organizations, citizens’ groups, rail advocacy groups and others in order to overcome our isolation and build power beyond our limited numbers.

12. Conducting national union conventions in conveniently located major rail hub cities such as Chicago, Kansas City and St. Louis, as opposed to cities like Las Vegas and Miami. In doing this, Delegates would be less likely to see their attendance as a junket or vacation. In addition, rank & file rail workers in these large rail hubs would be able to attend as guests and learn about how their union works and who the players are.

RWU is confident that these positions resonate with working railroad workers. For those wishing to adopt these positions – and for those who work to implement them upon obtaining union office – we fully expect that you will be victorious in your bid for election, and win the support and backing of the membership to move the union forward. (see Page 7 for more thoughts.)