Regulators Blast Union Pacific for Running Unsafe Trains

By Topher Sanders, ProPublica

Editor’s Note: This article was originally published by ProPublica, a nonprofit newsroom that investigates abuses of power.

The nation’s largest freight rail carrier failed to fix and continued to use faulty equipment, according to the Federal Railroad Administration. Managers reportedly pressured inspectors to leave the yard so they could keep freight moving.

On Sep. 8, Union Pacific, the nation’s largest freight railroad carrier, received a blistering letter from federal regulators who criticized the company for poorly maintaining its fleet, furloughing workers who perform train maintenance and allowing its managers to pressure inspectors to stop their efforts in order to keep freight moving.

The letter, signed by Federal Railroad Administration head Amit Bose, came after the agency inspected the company’s East Depar ture Yard in North Platte, Nebraska, this summer and found that more than 70% of the train engines had safety defects, as did 20% of the cars — defect ratios twice the national average. Conditions didn’t improve when inspectors returned and found locomotives with defects still in use. “We haven’t been able to get to them yet,” a Union Pacific director said, according to the letter.

The company “has not displayed a sense of urgency to improve locomotive and car conditions,” the letter said.

The revelation comes as the safety record of the country’s railroad industry is under deep scrutiny. All eyes have been on Norfolk Southern, whose train notoriously derailed in East Palestine, Ohio, in February, releasing toxic pollution and forcing a mass evacuation. But just one month later, Union Pacific had its own accident. A runaway train carrying iron ore reached a reported 118 mph before it derailed in Kelso, California. No one was injured.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg has been trying to get the nation’s largest freight rail companies, the so-called Class 1s, to participate in a voluntary safety program in which workers can confidentially report “close calls” like runaway trains and misaligned switches without fear of retribution; NASA would process submissions, as it does for a similar program that governs the aviation industry.

The rail industry has resisted, saying employees could use the system to avoid punishment for their own safety violations. In a slight departure from the other big companies, a spokesperson with Union Pacific said it is more concerned that the system could delay how quickly the company addresses safety problems. The company, which is the largest railroad in the world, said in a statement that safety is its first priority and that it wouldn’t compromise the safety of its staff. “There is no correlation between recent furloughs and Union Pacific’s ability to address mechanical repairs,” the statement said, adding that the company has appropriate staffing. The statement went on to say that Union Pacific will address the concerns raised in the letter and that it respects the federal inspectors. The company will be sending a formal response.

Labor union leaders said the safety problems flagged at Union Pacific are the natural byproduct of a business model adopted by the train companies called precision scheduled railroading (PSR). As ProPublica reported earlier this year, it places an emphasis on efficiency, running heavier, longer trains with leaner staffs and keeping them in constant motion.

“Until these railroads say they are done with PSR, this is what we’re going to get,” said Randy Fannon, a national vice president for the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen. “There’s no community safe from these defects and dangerous situations. UP will have their East Palestine soon unless they correct these issues and return to a normal maintenance program.”

According to the letter, federal inspectors got numerous calls from Union Pacific managers, including high-ranking company officials, requesting that they leave the yard because they were slowing down business. Under the Trump administration, inspectors might have complied, said Jared Cassity, the alternate national legislative director at the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers, known as SMART. He called the federal letter “absolutely terrifying.”

“It just speaks to the fact that [company-based] inspections are not being done in a meaningful way. And the fact that Union Pacific is furloughing is only doubling down on the status of our equipment and just how dangerous it really is,” Cassity said. “They’re spitting in the face of railroad safety.”
RWU Launches Membership Renewal Drive

For nearly 16 years, RWU has taken the lead in building railroad worker solidarity and activism. Last fall, RWU launched a successful “Vote NO” campaign that encouraged and inspired rails from all crafts to vote down the national Tentative Agreements in freight reached between carriers and union officials. Dozens of RWU activists went public and blew the whistle on the carriers’ antics, calling them out for their profiteering, lack of maintenance and inspections, short-staffing, draconian attendance policies, and all the rest. In doing so, we helped create a movement that ultimately has brought some semblance of paid sick leave to rail workers of all crafts among the Class One carriers.

Since our 2008 founding, RWU has tirelessly worked to save the two-person train crew, and we have led that fight when the operating craft unions were at each others’ throats. We led the “Vote No!” campaign on BNSF in 2014 - when the carrier and the union proposed to run trains with a single person - and we helped to sink the Tentative Agreement by a 5-to-1 margin. We vigorously supported the W&LE engineers and trainmen when their train crews were similarly under attack when this regional railroad carrier attempted single person train operations.

Meanwhile, we have supported every effort to bring the rail craft unions together, including our support for the All Rail Crafts Coalition (ARCC) in 2017, and our ongoing Campaign for One Big Bargaining Coalition. From Day One, our slogan has been — even as the rail craft union officials parted ways and sold one another down the river last fall — “No craft/union settles until ALL settle!” United we stand, divided we fall!

Through creative tactics, membership activism, and a principled strategy based upon our Statement of Principles, we have been able to move rail labor forward. But to build a movement that is truly successful, we need YOU! All railroad workers from ALL crafts and ALL unions, from ALL carriers are urged to JOIN RWU TODAY!

If you like what you see, including:
- The RWU official statement on the PEB Recommendations.
- Our Strike T-shirts, buttons, and stickers.
- The VOTE NO Campaign we waged throughout Fall 2022.
- Last year’s survey of Rail Worker Thoughts on PEB #250.
- The RWU official statement to the FRA on train crew staffing.
- The breadth of resources offered on the RWU website.
- RWU Resolutions on major issues of importance to rail workers
- The RWU Campaign Against Precision Scheduled Railroading.
- The RWU Campaign Against Single Person Crews.
- The RWU Newsletter, The Highball.
- Our Weekly Rail & Labor News Email Service.
- RWU Cartoons and Graphics.
- The scope of our activism and solidarity as presented in our 2022 Annual Report.

... Then perhaps it is time for you to JOIN! All of that listed above — and a whole lot more - takes time, energy, and funding. The vast majority of our budget, and practically all of our energy, comes from rank & file workers like you - through their membership, their dues, and their activism. Brothers and Sisters, we ask you to take part as well. Like you, we are railroad workers. Our Steering Committee is made up of working railroaders from various crafts, unions, and carriers in both passenger and freight service. Make yourself welcome, Fellow Workers. Just $50/year.

Finally, consider this: most railroad workers spend over $100 per month on union dues. Given the current state of affairs, it is a fair question to ask if railroad workers are getting sufficient value for their dues expenses when it comes to effectively challenging the carriers, compared to investing a fraction of that in RWU. Working railroaders have limited free time, so as RWU has grown and developed, we have needed to hire a modest staff in order to continue and to expand our work. We know many rails appreciate what we do. Now we need all of our friends and supporters to join so that we can take our fight to the next level.

RWU website.
All of that listed above takes time, energy, and funding. The breadth of resources offered on the RWU website.

Statement of Principles
Unity of All Rail Crafts
An End to Inter-Union Conflict
Rank-and-File Democracy
Membership Participation & Action
Solidarity Among All Railroaders
No to Concessionary Bargaining

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RWU P.O. Box #221191 Chicago, IL 60622
**Rail Workers’ Group Opposes Sale of Cincinnati Southern to Private Rail Giant NS**

Sale would mean the end of the nation’s only municipally owned railroad.

Railroad Workers United - a cross-craft grouping of railroad workers drawn from the ranks of all crafts, unions and rail carriers - opposes the sale of the Cincinnati Southern, the only municipally owned - and one of the nation’s few publicly held pieces of rail infrastructure - to the Class One rail giant Norfolk Southern (NS). The group is urging all citizens of Cincinnati who are eligible voters to vote NO in the referendum to be held in November.

On July 13th, the railway's Board of Directors voted to place the proposed sale on the ballot this Fall. Per statute, the citizens of the City will get the final say. Should they approve the plan, the nation's only municipally owned interstate rail line - from Cincinnati to Chattanooga - would then be purchased for a paltry $1.62 billion by the private Class One rail carrier.

According to RWU General Secretary Jason Doering, "Given the profiteering and irresponsibility of the Class One rail carriers in recent decades, the citizens of Cincinnati would do well to take this vote seriously. RWU urges the people of the Queen City to keep their rail infrastructure in public hands, and to vote NO on November 7th." In June, RWU adopted a Resolution in Support of Continued Public Ownership of the Cincinnati Southern Railroad.

Emily Spring, a Cincinnati resident, local activist and community organizer believes that, "Selling the CSR to Norfolk Southern would not only hurt the railroad's workers and surrounding communities - neighborhoods historically affected by unfair economic and political practices - it would give the power that we have as Cincinnatians to yet another billionaire corporation that continues to put profits over people. I, along with others in my community, am prepared to block this sale and fight to keep our railroad in the hands of Cincinnatians." According to Spring, "For Cincinnati, for our environment, for rail workers, and for our communities, it's time to Derail this Sale!"

The large rail systems in the United States - which includes Norfolk Southern and five others - have become more and more concentrated in recent decades, while running roughshod over rail workers, passengers, shippers and communities along their routes. "In recent years shippers have complained about the decline in freight service prompting federal Surface and Transportation Board hearings," according to locomotive engineer and RWU Co-Chair Ross Grooters. "Passenger and commuter service has likewise suffered while trackside communities like East Palestine Ohio have felt firsthand the dangerous cutbacks in rail employment and rail safety."

Yet, while these massive corporations moved 21% less freight last year than they did collectively in 2006, their profits and stock prices reached all-time highs last year. "The rail industry is basically a monopoly, and has come to serve one dictate - that of Wall Street," according to RWU Recording Secretary and freight conductor Nick Wurst. "The vast majority of Class One income has gone to stock buybacks, not expansion and development."

Because of these and other failures of the rail industry, Railroad Workers United is pushing a Campaign in Support of Public Ownership of the Railroads. Matt Weaver, Maintenance-of-Way Worker and RWU Steering Committee member from Toledo notes that, "The rail industry has robbed the American people blind for 150 years now. Millions of acres of land and massive subsidies were given to the "Robber Barons" of old. Today's rail industry is the same, indifferent to the needs and concerns of their own workers and customers, let alone the nation. The citizens of Cincinnati would be wise to hold onto their railroad infrastructure as their forefathers understood the perils of private rail ownership. They would not be well served by this sale."

**RWU Presents Session on Public Ownership at Socialism Conference 2023**

While most were justifiably relaxing over Labor Day weekend, RWU members Fritz Edler, Mark Burrows and Michelle Burke were at the annual Socialism Conference, sponsored by Haymarket Books, in Chicago. They staffed a table in front of our new banner (pictured at right), selling a few books and bumper stickers, distributing 40+ Highballs, hundreds of leaflets and engaging in discussions with many of the 2,000 participants.

There were hundreds of sessions/workshops covering a broad range of social justice issues, including labor organizing and resistance. A couple highlights included sessions on building rank & file power with representatives from Teamsters for a Democratic Union and Unite All Workers for Democracy (see article on Page 7). 35-40 people attended RWU’s session, “The Case for Nationalizing the Railroads.” The discussion that followed was inspiring. Many more activists now understand our issues and want to extend their support and solidarity.
Norfolk Southern’s Safety Report: A Missed Opportunity for Genuine Labor Engagement?

In the wake of the recent safety report by Atkins Nuclear Secured (ANS) on Norfolk Southern’s operations, many in the rail labor community are left pondering: Is this another instance of railroads prioritizing external consultants over the genuine concerns of their workforce?

Consultants Over Workers?:
While ANS’s comprehensive assessment offers a plethora of recommendations, one can’t help but wonder: Why the heavy reliance on consultants when the most valuable insights come from those on the ground? The very workers who operate the trains, maintain the tracks, and ensure the smooth running of operations possess a wealth of knowledge that no external entity can replicate.

Union Engagement - A Token Gesture?:
The report mentions meetings with representatives from thirteen railroad unions. But were these meetings in-depth? Were they more than just a box-ticking exercise? Genuine safety improvements can only be realized when there's a deep, ongoing dialogue with those who face the daily realities of rail work.

Key Recommendations - Are They Enough?:
Several of the report’s recommendations, while sounding impressive on paper, raise eyebrows:

Learning from Accidents:
While the emphasis on learning from injury and accident events is commendable, one must ask: Why weren’t these processes in place already? And how transparent will the company be in sharing these findings with its workforce?

Shift in Accountability Focus:
The suggestion to move from a punitive approach to one of teaching and coaching is long overdue. However, will this shift be genuine, or will it be another superficial change without real substance?

Restoring Worker Trust:
The report speaks of rebuilding relationships to restore worker trust. But trust isn’t built through reports; it’s built through actions, transparency, and genuine engagement.

The Real Missed Opportunity:
The most glaring omission? A lack of emphasis on regular, open forums where workers can voice their concerns without fear of retribution. Where are the mechanisms for continuous feedback, not just periodic assessments by external consultants?

While Norfolk Southern’s engagement with ANS might be a step towards improving safety culture, it’s essential to question the heavy reliance on external consultants. Genuine, lasting change can only be achieved when railroads prioritize the voices of their workers over polished reports. It’s time rail corporations recognize that their most valuable consultants are the very workers who keep the trains running.

The Railway Labor Act: A Double-Edged Sword for Railroad Workers

The 2022 United States railroad labor dispute wasn’t just a fleeting headline; it was a glaring spotlight on the power dynamics between labor unions, big businesses, and political interests. At the heart of this tussle is the Railway Labor Act (RLA), a piece of legislation that, while preserving economic stability, may have set a concerning precedent for the future of labor rights, especially for railroad workers.

The Historical Bind of the Railway Labor Act:
The RLA, established with the noble intent of preventing disruptions to interstate commerce, has over the years become a tool that curtails the very essence of labor rights: the power to strike. By allowing Congress to intervene in railroad or airline strikes, the Act inadvertently places workers at a disadvantage, often subjecting them to decisions influenced more by political and economic pressures than genuine worker grievances.

The 2022 Dispute: A Symptom of a Larger Malaise:
The recent railroad labor dispute is a manifestation of this imbalance. While the initial agreement between rail companies and unions seemed promising, its rejection by union members and the subsequent political intervention showcased a system skewed in favor of business continuity over labor rights. This isn’t just a singular event; it’s a symptom of a system that might be progressively eroding the power of labor unions.

The Troubling Disconnect:
What’s more concerning is the apparent rift between union leadership and rank-and-file members. When union decisions don’t reflect the collective sentiment, it begs the question: Whose interests are truly being represented? This disconnect doesn’t just undermine current negotiations; it threatens the very foundation of trust upon which unions are built.

The Future Implications: A Bleak Forecast for Railroad Workers:

The ramifications of the 2022 dispute extend far beyond immediate wage or leave agreements. By sidelining workers’ voices and setting a precedent of political intervention, we risk creating a future where railroad workers, and indeed all workers, have diminished bargaining power. If unions can’t effectively leverage the right to strike, and if political interests consistently lean towards business imperatives, where does that leave the average railroad worker? It paints a future where worker grievances might be perpetually overshadowed by the broader economic narrative, leaving them vulnerable to unfavorable working conditions, stringent policies, and potential exploitation.

While the 2022 dispute has been resolved on paper, its echoes will resonate for years to come. As we reflect on its aftermath, we must ask ourselves: Are we okay with a system that potentially muzzles the voices of those who power our economy from behind the scenes? It’s time we re-evaluate the balance between economic interests and labor rights, ensuring that the scales don’t tip so far in one direction that we lose sight of the fundamental rights of workers.
Destiny intervened by blowing a fatigued knuckle apart, forcing me to stand and wait for relief, and when it came, I begged them not to proceed before descending that cold precipice in a snow fighter. I was to find out later that the train had been built in direct contravention of General Operating Instructions, loads behind empties. In addition, an outlawed brake valve on at least one car had been incorporated into the mix, and tie straps had been fashioned to force gladhands to stay together.

It was a culpable dereliction of management to risk a train and two crews in this way, particularly where it passed through the vibrant communities of Alberta and BC, potentially endangering thousands a la Lac-Mégantic scant years before. Nothing had apparently changed since then.

I couldn’t sleep that night, tossing and turning for hours, badly jarred by events, so I went for a quiet haunting of the bunkhouse where I encountered my old mucker, Andy Dockrell. “What happened to your train?”, he implored. “An undesired release and a knuckle”, I tiredly advised. “No, no, it’s much worse than that. It’s all over the mountain! Twenty six cars derailed.” That morbid Nenasheff feeling rose within me again. “How’s the crew?” “They’re safe,” Andy responded but, with the darkest cloud of an expression I have ever seen and will never forget, enjoined, “These f@#$&!$!$ guys are going to kill someone one day.” We both understood who those guys were in their tailored suits.

He was right. Exactly a month to the day later, Andy and his young crew mates, Dylan Paradis and Dan Waldenburger-Bulmer, were killed - pulverized beyond recognition - in the Field Hill wreck of February 4, 2019. A brake failure akin to my own robbed them of their lives, dumping their runaway train into the Kicking Horse river: father ripped from child, son torn from parent, husband denied to wife, brother swept from sibling. I have to live with this dreadful knowledge, a survivor myself of myriad entences and observations leading up to this preventable tragedy.

“CP had tampered with the scene and obstructed the subsequent investigation...”

The news was devastating: My friend and colleague of over twenty years, Tony Nenasheff, had been killed by a train instructed to shove blind into an adjacent track to where he had been comparing mythological paperwork to the actuality of his train.

To add to the horror, unbelievably, the reversing crew had not even been told of the fatality and were dispatched north, only to be notified near the end of their trip and returned to Calgary by a road manager once the train had maintained its profitability. CP had tampered with the scene and obstructed the subsequent investigation, receiving a slap on the wrist from Transport Canada for doing so, in perfect keeping with most other incomprehensible whitewashes. So began this tragic winter of discontent:

Editor’s Note: RWU has covered the infamous Field Hill wreck previously with the facts available to us. RWU member Mark Bretherton is a locomotive engineer with 26 years at CP KC and operates on the Laggan Sub, west of Calgary. He has served as Vice Local Chair for Conductors with the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference Division 355. Here he shares his first-hand experiences and observations leading up to this preventable tragedy.

I knew it was coming, the dread expectancy had been building for years with every flagrant compounding of safety breaches, every episode of bullying and harassment, every instance of wantonly unwarranted discipline, every push for productivity over safety. Now it was here.

I walked, called for a potash train, into the Brownhouse, the Calgary terminal crew check-in office for Canadian Pacific Railway, (CP) on that uncommonly mild November afternoon in 2018, to be met by ashen faces. “Did you hear what happened?” one asked of me. With a rising sense of fear, I replied, “No. What?”, dropping my grip to the floor, sensing doom.

“CP had tampered with the scene and obstructed the subsequent investigation...”

The railway is a mint of vast fortunes, gouged but not earned, from the bodies of dead men, women, and children. Rail crews are lashed like pit ponies as a means of production while our own officers snipe into our trenches from gilded firing positions. Governments, in a sickening conflict of interest, protect these degenerates as if their incompetence and indifference is the only way to run a railway, collateral damage being less important than the economic bullseye.

We need public ownership of the railways, governed by capable wage earners instead of coiffed dividend grabbers. We need responsibility, accountability, compassion, and care. We need functional unions, dutiful governments, and a population chastened into demanding rail safety. This historical insouciance to profits über alles has to end. It has the potential to turn democracy into dystopia but we can’t let it happen on our watch.

We know the truth.
**Commentary**

**The Status Quo has Got to Go! Time to Get Off the Couch!**

The wreckage of CP train #301, which derailed when the air brake system failed in arctic temperatures on a steep mountain grade, descending the Field Hill in British Columbia, on Feb. 4, 2019. Brothers Andy Dockrell, Dylan Paradis, and Dan Waldenburger-Bulmer suffered a horrifying death.

Well, if you haven't already, I urge you all to read the guest commentary from Brother Mark Bretherton, “Eyewitness Account of Known Hazards That Led to Field Hill Tragedy”, on Page 5. Regular readers of The Highball know that RWU and I have previously written about the tragic, preventable Field Hill derailment on the Canadian Pacific (CP) in February, 2019, that killed Brothers Andy Dockrell, Dylan Paradis and Dan Waldenburger-Bulmer. But Brother Mark’s first hand experience with the circumstances and the factors that contributed to this horrific tragedy not only validates my seething outrage and indignation, but further indict the CP for their willful, criminal negligence.

Now granted this incident is just one of numerous on-the-job fatalities over the last several years, but this one has always spiked a raw nerve for me, given how the circumstances and factors that led to this, in addition to CP’s conduct after the incident, are just so over-the-top and in-your-face egregious. Just in the last few months there have been several railroad workers killed on the job. A few of them involved the remote control operations, which has always made my blood boil.

I remember when this new technology was on the verge of being implemented in the industry. I thought to myself, “Surely the operating craft unions, in spite of all their backstabbing and undercutting each other over the years, would unite over this issue, if for no other reason than their own self-interest considering the dues paying members that would ultimately be reduced significantly.” Obviously safety is the main reason they needed to draw a line in the sand and mount a principled, ferocious resistance.

So here we are, tens of thousands of jobs lost and dozens of fatalities and injuries later. In the last several months there have also been incidents involving trainees and or conductors turned loose with insufficient training. Again, another line in the sand the unions needed to take a stand, demanding sufficient training, considering railroad workers report to a potential death trap - under the best of conditions - every day just to make a living.

The disastrous derailment in East Palestine, OH this past April, as well as the Lac-Mégantic tragedy ten years ago, show that just being in proximity to railroad tracks could potentially put you in a death trap if hazardous, deadly commodities get unleashed in some kind of incident. A common thread running through all this is the contemptuous indifference the carriers have towards all of us - workers and the public.

So what if they have to occasionally pay a few million dollars in some settlement. They all have massive liability insurance policies and they just pay the deductible. Just like occasionally having to pay a few penalty claims as the cost of doing business so they can freely violate our agreements, paying these deductibles and occasional fines is just another cost of doing business. If fines and lawsuits served as any kind of deterrent they wouldn’t have been doubling and tripling down on their irresponsible recklessness over the last few decades. It’s an indisputable fact that operating rogue is more profitable than operating responsibly.

The article on page 4, “The Railway Labor Act: A Double-Edged Sword for Railroad Workers”, points out how the Railway Labor Act (RLA) leaves railroad workers vulnerable to the dictates and whims of the carriers. Veteran rails knew exactly how the 2022 contract standoff would ultimately play out. But now a new generation of younger railroad workers knows that we will never be able to mount meaningful resistance for safety, dignity and quality of life on and off the job as long as we accept the status quo.

So what needs to happen? Good question and I’m glad you asked. In my opinion it starts with railroad workers declaring that the current terms of engagement are simply unjust and unacceptable. If you disagree with that assessment and accept that’s just how it is – that the RLA is just part of the established process - as our current rail union leaders do, then just “take your beating like a man” and quit bitching on social media. You’ve got nothing to complain about.

For those who are outraged and insulted by how the 2022 contract negotiations played out, then we’ve got a lot of work to do. As long as the union leadership accepts the enemy’s terms of engagement, then we’re not going to be able to mount any meaningful resistance as long as the rank & file accept that leadership. Railroad workers need to reconquer our human right to withhold our labor when all else fails. We need to transform OUR unions from the bottom to the top to effectively assert that.

One of the major highlights of this year’s wave of labor resistance was when the Teamsters union extracted significant concessions from UPS with just the mere threat of a strike - a testament to an organized, mobilized rank & file accept that leadership. Railroad workers need to reconquer our human right to withhold our labor when all else fails. We need to transform OUR unions from the bottom to the top to effectively assert that.

Mark Burrows has served as Organizer and Co-Chair for RWU. He retired at the end of 2015, 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.
No Reform Caucus, No Auto Workers’ Strike

Editor's Note: The efforts of the Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) caucus show that change does not just happen - people organizing makes it happen. Rail workers who are disaffected by their union officials’ lackadaisical attitude and meek reactions to attacks by the rail carriers would be wise to organize similarly into caucuses within their respective rail unions and build an opposition movement that can win a more democratic and member-focused union, in order to fight more effectively for safety, dignity and quality of life, on and off the job.

This article was originally published in The Call, a publication of the Bread & Roses caucus of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The author, Jane Slaughter, is a former editor of Labor Notes, a co-author of “Secrets of a Successful Organizer”, and a member of the Detroit DSA chapter. She is also a member of DSA’s Bread & Roses caucus.

As this issue goes to press, the UAW strike against the “Big 3” rages on - a battle that the entire working class has a stake in. Railroad workers should extend their solidarity and assess the important lessons.

What can workers seeking to reinvigorate their unions learn from the new spirit in the United Auto Workers?

Start with What You’ve Got

One lesson is that member power does not have to start from a supermajority; that’s unlikely. UAW members are on strike today, with inspiring levels of rank-and-file energy, because four years ago a small group of activists founded a new reform caucus. That caucus, Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), boldly took advantage of an unexpected opportunity, organized like crazy, and won elections. Its candidates are now leading the union.

If UAWD had not existed and organized hard, this current fight that has potential to change the stakes for the entire labor movement would not be happening. At the top, the UAW would still be a pretty bad business union, intent on negotiating a cheap contract (perhaps with a BS strike), and members would be in the dark.

When the Justice Department began investigating the UAW for corruption, a few longtime activists saw the opening. In 2019, they founded UAWD and began a campaign - which seemed quixotic at the time - to change the UAW’s constitution so that members could vote directly for top officers.

Since the union’s founding in the 1930s, convention delegates had chosen the officers. From the 1940s until this year conventions were tightly managed by the aptly named Administration Caucus, founded by Walter Reuther. The process for amending the constitution was byzantine, but in a short time UAWD was approaching its goal of getting the required 15 locals representing 79,000 members on board to call a special convention.

Then Covid hit, canceling local union meetings and closing plants.

UAWD rebounded, though, and was soon making its views known to the Justice Department: the way to clear out corruption was to let the members vote. This was the same tack taken by Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) in the 1980s, when their union was under investigation. TDU rejected the idea of a federal takeover, as many in government had advocated, and said instead: “Let the members decide.” The feds authorized a rank-and-file vote, Ron Carey was elected president with TDU’s support, and he went on to lead a stunningly popular and successful strike in 1997.

Eventually the Justice Department’s Monitor said he would let UAW members decide whether they wanted to decide. In Fall 2021, they voted whether to keep the old convention system or switch to one-member-one-vote. Turnout was low - only 14 percent of the 400,000 members and 600,000 retirees, indicating both the high degree of member cynicism and the sorry state of the union’s address book - but the direct elections option won by 63.6 percent.

The Administration Caucus, who at that point still ran the union, tried to pretend the vote was not happening, but UAWD campaigned hard, with members building contact lists, distributing leaflets, phone-banking, talking with co-workers and the media, getting pledges signed, doing social media, and holding online events. They got UAWD members elected as convention delegates and managed to turn the 2022 convention from a ceremonial snoozefest and rubber stamp to a site for debate. The convention raised strike pay and had it start on a strike’s first day instead of its eighth - ensuring that the union’s $800 million strike fund could be used to make the decision to strike less painful for members.

UAWD, which by this time included both factory workers and members from the union’s newer higher ed locals, then nominated seven people for a slate called UAW Members United to run for the 14-member executive board. Again members campaigned hard, taking road trips around the Midwest and holding Zoom events in addition to all their other tactics. The Administration Caucus, accustomed to total control for nearly 80 years, still did not take the UAWD threat seriously. When members voted in fall 2022, again with a very low turnout, five Members United candidates and one friendly independent were elected outright and the other two, including presidential candidate Shawn Fain, went to a runoff.

At this point, the AC woke up and threw everything it had into the union’s address book - but the direct elections option won by 63.6 percent.

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Have Faith in the Members

UAWD did not represent a supermajority of the members and only a bare majority of those who voted. Yet Fain and his allies on the board and in the rank and file believed they could win over and activate members who had been uninvolved, skeptical, or even despairing about their union.

So despite the deep muck at union headquarters and the fact that local officers were almost uniformly allied with the Administration Caucus, they set to work building a contract campaign -
Join the Fight To Save the Two-Person Train Crew!
All Single-Employee Crew Merchandise on Sale!

RWU has lots of stuff to assist you in the fight to save the two-person train crew. T-shirts, buttons, stickers, bumper stickers, flyers, yard signs and more. Get yours today!

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“What can Labor do for itself? The answer is not difficult. Labor can organize, it can unify; it can consolidate its forces. When this done, it can demand and command.”
Eugene V Debs, Founder of the American Railway Union

Join Railroad Workers United Today!
Visit our website: railroadworkersunited.org and click the link to JOIN RWU

When you join RWU, you unite with a growing network of railroaders who strive to build unity, democracy and solidarity among the railroad workers of North America. Specifically, when you join here’s some of what you get:

- Your personal RWU membership card.
- Various lapel and bumper stickers (see below).
- The RWU newsletter mailed to you each issue.
- Discounts up to 25% on most RWU merchandise.
- Free (or discounted) bundles of the newsletter to distribute.
- Meeting Minutes from each Steering Committee meeting.
- The right to attend the RWU Biennial Convention.
- Most importantly, you will become part of a network of like-minded railroaders who are working to make a difference. For advice, encouragement, ideas, and support to assist you in your day-to-day struggles on the railroad, there is no finer network today to be a part of than Railroad Workers United!

No Reform Caucus, No UAW Strike
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strike pledge cards, practice picketing, lots of communication, lots of media - that built to the strike that started Sep. 15. Despite their slim majority, they took their mandate seriously and pushed hard to do what they had promised. They went directly to rank-and-file members.

The results have been stunning. Members at the Big 3, whether they voted for UAWD or for no one, are thrilled that their president is actually sharing the union's demands, speaking to them regularly via Facebook Live (and responding in real time to comments in the chat), and calling out the CEOs who make up to $14,000 an hour, with class-struggle language seldom heard outside a Bernie Sanders rally. The excitement on the picket lines and the creativity of the slogans and tactics members are inventing are something not seen in the union in many decades. Members have rediscovered respect for their union and for themselves as auto workers and union members.

Seize the Moment
That brings up a second lesson, which is for workers to grab their chance even if they're not completely ready. In a perfect world, UAWD would have grown through the years to represent a majority of well-organized members, proving itself through practice at the local level. Instead, a random corruption investigation, initiated during the Trump years, changed everything.

Lesson three, then, could be that it's worthwhile to keep the spark of reform alive even when it's tiny. Some of the UAWD founders were part of Autoworker Caravan, a group founded in 2008 to respond to the Chrysler bankruptcy. Caravan was never large - at some points attracting more retirees than active members - but it analyzed contracts, agitated to vote them down, and distributed information. Some of its leaders had been part of socialist groups in the 1970s. And the Caravan in turn incorporated veterans of the New Directions Movement of the 1980s, which had galvanized factory workers (especially in Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas) but was eventually beaten down by the Administration Caucus. Some UAWD leaders today go back as far as New Directions. The politics of union reform were kept alive even when hopes were bleak.

Now UAWD is helping workers develop into organizers. It's shown them how to call 10-minute meetings in their plants and how to organize practice pickets, flying squadrons, and overtime refusals. Leaders are well aware that despite the tremendous victory of winning at the top, their work to transform the union is just beginning.