

One Big Bargaining Coalition – An Idea Whose Time Has Come!

As we predicted, the current round of bargaining is turning out to be a showdown between the Class One freight carriers and the myriad unions. The carriers have been blunt – they insist on givebacks in healthcare and work rules. Specifically, as predicted, they are pushing hard to win implementation of single person crew operations. They have lots of money, lawyers, judges, politicians and legislation in their vast arsenal to assist them in their efforts. These wealthy Class One rail carriers are all “Fortune 500” corporations, some of the most powerful private entities in the world. Make no mistake, railroad workers are going up against some mighty big guns.

Given that we have an infinitesimally small amount of money in comparison; that we have a fraction of the legal team; that judges are generally pro-corporate and pro-business in outlook; that the laws were written and enforced to protect the interests of private property - not labor; and that the two political parties are both well-funded by big business, leaving workers with little political representation, what do we have going for us? Just what the hell are we to do?

To take the carriers head on effectively, we need to play ball in *our* court, not in *their* court. The biggest weapon that we have in our arsenal is the weapon known as *working class solidarity*. Without this basic and most important tool at our disposal, we would not stand a chance of achieving victory over such a formidable opponent. So, if solidarity is so important to our cause, just exactly what is it? How do we nurture it and build it? What are the obstacles to achieving it and putting it to work for us?

Solidarity is defined as “an awareness of shared interests, objectives, standards, and sympathies creating a psychological sense of unity of groups or classes.” It is the bedrock upon which all workplace unions are created and sustained. Eugene V Debs, founder of the American Railway Union and the father of railroad unionism in the United States, had this to say: “*We need to have faith in each other. We are in precisely the same position. We depend absolutely on each other. We know that without solidarity, nothing is possible; and that with solidarity, nothing is impossible.*”

To achieve some semblance of solidarity then, we must first conclude that we and our fellow workers are in the same boat, that our futures are inextricably linked to one another’s. On the surface this might sound easy enough. But there are countless hurdles that stand in the way of achieving that solidarity. The rail carriers – as with most employers - have been historically successful in sowing deep division among working people. Race, religion, national origin, language, gender, and sexual orientation have been a few of the tricks they have exploited to keep workers separate, apart, and powerless. But in many cases, workers have been able to overcome these divisions and unite.

Nevertheless, there are countless other ways that rail workers can be kept in submission. Here are just a few of the ways that railroaders have typically been divided: Yard versus Road; freight versus passenger; high seniority versus low seniority; “protected” vs “non-protected” or “pre-85” vs “post-85”; and by shift, department, carrier, terminal, district, hub, division, subdivision, service unit, and more. In building our unions, we must be able to overcome all these obstacles to achieving solidarity. In many cases, we have been.

Yet one of the biggest stumbling blocks to achieving the solidarity we desperately need is the perpetual question of *craft*. That is



In Mar 2011, close to 100,000 protest attacks on unions in Madison, WI. Not only do railroad workers need to unify within our ranks, we need to extend solidarity to and aid other working class struggles.

because this false division was institutionalized early on in railroad history, surprisingly by the unions themselves. Rail workers began to organize earlier than many workers due to the dangerous and harsh working conditions they faced. Those who worked together in craft felt a distinct solidarity with one another, as they shared workspace, tools, knowhow, and wisdom. In many cases their very lives depended intimately upon building trust with one another. So, it comes as no surprise that we originally organized along craft lines when we first got started. But within a few decades, it became apparent to many rail workers and some union officials – including Eugene Debs – that organizing along craft lines was actually hindering – rather than building – rail worker solidarity, crippling their ability to win their battles with the powerful rail carriers of the late 19th century.

Fast forward more than 125 years to today, and unfortunately, that albatross is still around our collective necks. But there is some good news. Compared to previous rounds of bargaining with the powerful rail carriers, in this round the archaic and antiquated craft unions - hopefully realizing that none of them can win alone and now refusing to be whipsawed against one another as they traditionally have allowed - have come together in coalition. This is a vast improvement upon previous national contact bargaining; however, we are not quite there yet. It is imperative that the two existing rail union coalitions join forces and present a single, united, unshakable front to the carriers. There is too much at stake in this round for any rail union to remain apart from the others.

“There is too much at stake in this (bargaining) round for any rail union to remain apart from the others.”

Ultimately, what we need is what exists in many countries – an industrial union of all railroad workers from all crafts and departments – to effectively coordinate future actions and to mitigate the power of the carriers. In the meantime, the union officials owe it to the members to come together in One Big Bargaining Coalition that is united and indivisible. Without such unity at the organizational level, solidarity among the respective memberships will be forever compromised, to the detriment of all rail labor. The time for divisiveness and squabbling has long passed. All for one and one for all! The time is NOW!