



Railroad Workers United

Unity—Solidarity—Democracy: The Rank and File in Action!

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The BNSF Single Employee Crew Initiative Defeated

The members of the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail & Transportation Workers (SMART) General Committee GO—001 have spoken. In a loud and clear mandate, they have told the BNSF railway, their union leaders, and the world, that they do not support single employee train crews. By 2-to-1, the rank and file voted down the tentative agreement, that – had it been ratified – would have resulted in conductorless train operations over more than half of the BNSF system, the second largest rail carrier in the U.S.

The members showed that rails cannot be bought for some silly “signing bonus”, for some vague promise of lucrative “buy-outs”, or for theoretical “full-pay furloughs”. They proved that they cannot be fooled by some “smoke and mirrors” contract that pretends to offer the moon while in fact, slitting their throats. They stated loud and clear that they would not lay down and be hoodwinked by the carrier or their own union leadership. And most importantly, they showed that they are ready, willing and able to stand up and fight against the unsafe and irresponsible initiative by the carriers to run trains with a single crew member.

In voting down this contract, the SMART GO-001 rank and file have won a decisive victory, not just for the trainmen and engineers on the BNSF, but for every railroad worker in North America. While the victory belongs to them, it is of course shared by all those who assisted – engineers (both UTU and BLET); union brothers and sisters from other crafts and carriers who rose to the occasion and helped out; family members who took part in pickets, rallies and demonstrations; fellow unionists and citizens who grasped the importance of the struggle and pitched in to help.

Railroad Workers United (RWU) is proud to have assisted in this fight. Since our founding in 2008, RWU has pledged to do all in our power to resist the carriers drive for single employee operation of trains. We drastically ramped up that effort in 2012 with a full-blown campaign to raise awareness and understanding of the issue among both railroaders and members of the general public. And once we learned of the BNSF TA, RWU swiftly moved into action. Within 48 hours, RWU convened an “emergency meeting” of the Steering Committee and other members to discuss our approach. We mobilized our network like never before. Thousands of buttons and sticker, flyers and leaflets, “Talking Points” and more were disseminated to BNSF rails in the following weeks. We issued a press release that was picked up by a number of newspapers in BNSF territory. RWU members spoke out on radio and TV stations, and organized rallies, pickets and demonstrations at numerous terminals, from large cities like Chicago and Seattle to small towns like Creston, Iowa. RWU members intervened in the debate at the SMART Convention in August, condemning the contract in no uncertain terms before the delegates assembled. We held a series of open telephone conference calls open to all railroad workers to voice their concerns, ask questions, and devise strategies and tactics to beat this thing. And we produced regular newsletter updates with the latest flyers, leaflets, stickers, articles, songs, graffiti and cartons.

Railroaders should rightfully be proud of their efforts and take the time to celebrate a hard won victory. We beat one of the most powerful corporations in North America today! But while we won this battle, don't think for a minute that we have won the war. The rail carriers are intent on running trains with a lone employee. Where will they strike next? Will it be UP, or CSX. Maybe Norfolk Southern? Or perhaps it will be on some regional railroad, opening the door for the big Class I carriers? We know that our embattled brothers and sisters on the Wheeling & Lake Erie (W&LE) have been fighting for years now to stave off single crews. And what General Committee (or union!) might be the next to capitulate and sell us out to the carriers? CSX Southern Lines already has an agreement with the UTU (SMART) to use "utility conductors", while the BNSF has agreement with the BLEET to implement RCO operations on the road. Sisters and brothers, we need to be ready for the next round. We must gather our forces and build our defenses. This is just the opening shot in what will prove to be a protracted war.

The last decade has shown us that we cannot rely on politicians, the FRA or our union officials to defend us from the carriers' attacks. We must do it ourselves! This latest debacle should be seen as a trial run. We did a lot of things right – pickets, demonstrations, rallies, militant vocal opposition, mass action, community and family involvement, cross-craft solidarity, use of the media to make our case, member-to-member contact, building the network, making use of humor, satire, music and more. As long as we – the rank and file – stand strong and are ready and organized to fight this thing – with all the creativity and ingenuity we got – then we stand a chance at winning.

RWU stands at the ready to assist in the next round of this fight wherever and whenever this may be. But we are still a small organization with limited resources and membership. We need you! If just one-out-of-a hundred railroad workers were to join RWU, we would exponentially increase our power and quadruple our membership! With these kinds of numbers we would have so much more strength, and be so better equipped for the battle next time around. This fight is real brothers and sisters. Who do you want in your corner when the threat of single employee train crews comes to your property?

But let's not wait for that fateful time to come. Between now and the next round of open warfare with the carrier, we must go on the offensive. Public opinion polls show that upwards of 80% of the population in the U.S. support a minimum of a two-person train crew. Citizens groups are aroused and organizing across the country for rail safety in the face of Lac Megantic. There are two-person train crew bills at the federal and state levels. Even the FRA is making noises about a two-person crew regulation. It is time for us railroad workers to grab the bull by the horns. The momentum is in our favor. We need to capitalize on our victory and take the initiative and not simply wait for the next assault by the rail carriers which is surely to come.

The power of the rank and file has been displayed these last few weeks for all to see. The genie is out of the bottle. The confidence of railroad workers has been given a shot in the arm. We can fight back. And we can win! So we celebrate our victory today, and ready ourselves for the fight tomorrow, more united, more dedicated, more informed, and more determined than ever. Solidarity!

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