



Railroad Workers United

Solidarity • Unity • Democracy

The Rank & File in Action!

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RWU Position Statement on Coordinated Bargaining Coalition

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Railroad Workers United (RWU) commends the union officials of the ten rail unions in the U.S. that recently announced their intentions to bargain as a group in this round of national handling with the rail carriers as the “Coordinated Bargaining Coalition.” It is unprecedented for the operating crafts and the shop crafts to come together on such a scale as this. The ten unions - American Train Dispatchers Association (ATDA); Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen / Teamsters Rail Conference (BLET); Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen (BRS); International Association of Machinists (IAM); International Brotherhood of Boilermakers (IBB); National Conference of Firemen & Oilers/SEIU (NCFO); International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW); Transport Workers Union of America (TWU); Transportation Communications Union / IAM (TCU); Transportation Division of the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers (SMART-TD) – will no doubt be stronger and more able to win better contracts if they are able to hold this coalition together. A universal coalition of all rail labor has been a major goal of Railroad Workers United since our founding in 2008.

Shortcomings

Just a few short years ago, the operating crafts were at one another’s’ throats, and the shop crafts were hopelessly divided into numerous “coalitions”. The rail unions were hopelessly divided, at best into several, ineffectual, irrational groupings, or at worst, facing off with the carriers independently. In comparison, this near universal coalition represents a drastic improvement for rail labor. While RWU sees this historic coalition as a step forward, it is not without shortcomings. To ensure that rail labor is strong and united at the bargaining table, more work needs to be done.

As it now stands, the Coalition fails to include two unions, the Mechanical Division of SMART and the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees Division (BMWED). The latter is one of the largest of the rail unions and is also – like the BLET – a member of the Teamsters Rail Conference. Together, the BLET and the BMWED represent a sizable block of rail labor, and for them to not both be in the same coalition is extremely harmful. Both unions had historically bargained together under the Teamster “umbrella” for the initial bargaining rounds following their respective mergers into the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) some 15 years ago. There is no good reason for them not to be able to work together inside the same coalition today. We urge rank & file members of both BLET and BMWED to call upon their respective leaderships to make the necessary compromises to ensure that there is room for both IBT affiliates in the Coordinated Bargaining Coalition. Likewise, it is absurd to have the two sections of SMART not be united in bargaining. Both the IBT and SMART have extolled the virtues of unification when they sought merger approval from the membership. It is an insult to the membership that these union officials are incapable of putting aside whatever petty jealousies, personality clashes, past differences, jurisdictional and/or financial concerns that apparently stand in the way of total unity. Leaders from these unions must put this aside to reach accommodation and unite for the sake of their membership. Failure to achieve the universal coalition that is at hand will critically weaken the Coordinated Bargaining Coalition.

In addition, there is apparently no provision for the myriad unions to stick together. To be truly effective, and to ensure that the rail unions are able to resist the carriers ability to divide-and-conquer as they have done so effectively for decades, we need a coalition that is bound by the adage, "no union settles until all settle." RWU believes wholeheartedly in the traditional union slogan that "An injury to one is an injury to all!" If the rail carriers can placate one union or group of unions, while simultaneously attacking others, we will have failed. The rail unions cannot simultaneously be in coalition yet fail to make a true commitment to one another.

While this Coalition is no doubt a step forward, RWU has grave concerns that their members were left out of the process. Union leaders continues to see this as their private domain, a theater in which they alone cut deals with one another as to whom will partner up with whom. The rank and file discuss, debate and vote on merger agreements. They do the same for Tentative Agreements on contracts. Likewise, they should be party to these negotiations among union leaders. The CBC was constructed in the traditional "back room" manner, in the dark, behind closed doors, with little or no participation by the rank & file. What really were the negotiations like? What is the common ground? What is the basis of the Coalition? How solid is it? And how much information does the coalition intend to share with the membership going forward? The members have little to no idea. This undemocratic and outmoded way that the unions do business must be scrapped.

Finally, this Coalition should have been consummated months - if not years - prior to the start of this round of bargaining. Ironically, the unions made the announcement just after the exchange of the Section 6 notices with the National Carriers Conference Committee (NCCC) on November 1st. The unions would have entered this round far stronger had they taken the time necessary to not just coordinate their Section 6 Notices, but to involve and mobilize their membership for the coming struggle. It is absurd to have waited to consummate this coalition when bargaining is about to begin. The work necessary to win a good contract starts long before the actual commencement of bargaining.

Conclusion

Despite these obvious shortcomings, RWU supports this development. It is not too late to perfect the coalition. The unions outside the Coalition can still be brought in. The participants can still endorse a binding statement of unity. And there is still time to involve the membership in the bargaining process. Let's build the coalition "on the ground", where the rank and file play an intrinsic and vital role in supporting and developing a culture of solidarity among all crafts and between all unions. Rail labor is currently facing a crisis in the face of Precision Scheduled Railroading, furloughs and layoffs, downsizing of the physical plant and reduced freight movement, threats to train crew staffing and other work rules. A principled and democratic Coordinated Bargaining Coalition of all offers rail labor a golden opportunity to change the entire balance of forces and to rebuild our power. The CBC is a definite step forward. Now it is time to address its shortcomings and make it develop into a long-lasting, democratic, vibrant and powerful force for progress.

Statement adopted by the RWU Steering Committee 11/5/19