



The Highball

Official Publication of
Railroad Workers United

Every Day is a Monday: Railroad Workers Describe Life on the Tracks

Over the two-month period of November and December 2024, Public Rail Now launched a questionnaire and interview project to elevate the voices of railroad workers and bring the railroad industry back into the light. We received over 130 questionnaire responses from railroad workers across the U.S. which were as enlightening as they were alarming. The follow-up interviews only reinforced our view that the problems in the railroad industry require bold action on the part of the federal government.

All the Livelong Day

According to one CSX conductor, using personal leave today is "like buying concert tickets . . . nine times out of ten, I'm either sleeping or working, so I can't call off when I need to." The long working hours demanded by the rail corporations, reinforced by oppressive attendance policies, make it difficult for railroad workers to spend time with their loved ones. "We used to be able to take off," a BNSF conductor told us. "Not anymore. I am seeing my family less." To compensate for the hours spent away from spouses and children, railroad workers often eschew a full night's rest. An already fatigued workforce is further exhausted.

It is important to note that while railroad workers are unable to spend time with their families, even on holidays, this is not the case for management. According to an engineer at UP, "Every day now is a Monday. No holidays whatsoever. Management does not work on holidays . . . They don't have limited time off. It's demoralizing as hell having to put up with that mentality. You're expected to be at work and they're spending time with their families."

Many railroad workers, particularly those with children, are the sole wage-earners in their homes, as the severity of their work schedules complicates employment for their spouses and makes childcare difficult. "It's hard for a spouse to get a job when you've got this job," a UP conductor explained. "You never know when you'll need a babysitter, or if your wife gets sick . . . especially with the attendance policy, it's difficult to have a spouse working and having young kids."

"Orwellian Nightmare"

On the railroads, surveillance of the workforce reaches well beyond necessary safety measures to the point of incredulity. "I'll be honest, I saw the survey and I was nervous to fill it out," a conductor told us. "They've got the eye in the sky; they're always watching you."

According to an engineer at UP, managers "hide in bushes, on hillsides with binoculars. We had a manager who parked his rig a mile away and he'd walk in the dark in the middle of the night and sneak up on you." Recalling an incident that could not help but elicit a chuckle, a CSX maintenance of way worker said one day on the job, "...something came walking up to us out of the woods – it was a manager in a ghillie suit. I'll put my hand on a



Our unions need to fight with more urgency for safer, dignified conditions on the job and enhanced quality of life off the job.

bible for that one." A CSX engineer told us one of his past managers "...would climb a tree – he bought night vision goggles and a radio for watching crews . . . he'd sit in that tree and watch you for hours."

In addition to guerilla-style stalking, railroad managers have embraced the use of drones – sometimes to disastrous results – in their surveillance of workers. "I've seen the drones," a CN engineer said. "They've flown them right at the conductor's window. These managers want to make a name for themselves. They don't care who they fxxx."

"I know a couple of instances where a manager crashed a drone," a CSX conductor said. "I know they got in trouble flying the drones by airports and near a chemical plant."

"Two words," he said, "Orwellian nightmare."

"You're just a Number"

The quality of railroad work has diminished since many of the "old heads" (longtime railroad workers) were hired, not just in terms of work-life balance, but also material conditions. Several railroad workers described the shoddy equipment and furnishings they encounter on the job which management often refuses to repair, leaving the workers to do it themselves. "I have zip-ties and duct tape," a conductor said, "you'd be amazed how often I have to use them."

How can such a crucial and profitable industry care so little for its workforce? One would think that workers with such a tremendous responsibility – keeping the U.S. economy running – would enjoy at least a modicum of respect and appreciation from their employers. This, however, is not the case.

"You're just a number – they don't care if you die," a UP engineer said, "they'll get another dancing chicken out there to do the job."

To learn more about the campaign for a public rail system, please visit publicrailnow.org



RWU News

RWU Welcomes New Membership Organizer Keegan Waller

Railroad Workers United (RWU) is pleased to welcome Keegan Waller as our new Membership Organizer. With extensive experience in labor organizing and grassroots mobilization, Keegan will focus on growing RWU's membership, strengthening engagement, and expanding the organization's capacity to support rail workers.

Keegan has a strong background in union organizing and rank-and-file empowerment. He has successfully mobilized workers, built solidarity, and fought for improved workplace conditions. His commitment to social and transportation justice makes him a valuable addition to RWU's mission.

"We found Keegan easy to talk to during the interview and the conversation just flowed," said RWU General Secretary Nick Wurst. "He is well versed in identifying and organizing strategic methods to build membership and training members to become leaders; we felt this would be a golden opportunity for RWU."

This position is made possible through grant funding, enabling RWU to expand its organizing efforts and reach more rail workers. We hope to make the best use of the funds over the next 18 months to grow and develop into a bigger and better RWU!



As an inter-union, cross-craft solidarity caucus, RWU strives to unite rail workers from different crafts, carriers, and unions. With ongoing challenges posed by corporate-driven rail policies, a dedicated organizer is essential to strengthening our movement. Keegan will lead recruitment efforts, develop outreach strategies, and support local chapters to build RWU's grassroots presence.

"I think RWU has the potential to transform the railroad industry and to raise the material standards of workers across all crafts. I'm excited to begin working with rank-and-file railroad-

ers from all over the country as we continue building our organization and growing our power."

Keegan will make his first major appearance at RWU's strategy meeting and training in Chicago on April 12-13, 2025, where he will collaborate with members and leaders to enhance organizing efforts. RWU is confident that Keegan's leadership will help us grow and strengthen our collective fight for railroad workers' rights. Please join us in welcoming him to the RWU team!

RWU Joins the Board of the Eugene V. Debs Foundation

As this issue goes to press, the Board of Directors of The Eugene V. Debs Foundation just voted to accept RWU's application for a position on the board at their Spring meeting. RWU's Steering Committee has designated *The Highball* Editor Mark Burrows to serve as RWU's official representative.

Among other endeavors, the Foundation oversees a wealth of historical archives and operates the Debs Museum out of his longtime home in Terre Haute, IN. They sponsor numerous public events honoring Debs' legacy as a tireless fighter for the working class, social justice and ultimately a better world.

The highlight is the Debs Award Banquet held annually in the Fall. Last year Sara Nelson, President of the Flight Attendants Union - CWA was the deserving recipient (see the Fall 2024 issue of *The Highball*) and gave an inspiring call-to-action speech that would have made Brother "Gene" proud. In these turbulent times, keeping that legacy alive is more important than ever.

From all of us at
Railroad Workers United

THANK YOU to all Our Donors,
Our Monthly Sustainers and Our Members
We appreciate YOU!

Railroad Workers United

Railroad Workers United was organized in April 2008 at a Founding Convention in Dearborn, MI. RWU grew out of decades of struggle within the craft unions for unity, solidarity, and democracy. We are carrying on a tradition of rank & file activity which dates back to the 1890s and the time of Eugene V. Debs.

RWU is a cross-craft inter-union caucus of rail labor activists across North America. All rail workers of all crafts from all carriers who support our Statement of Principles are welcome to join in our efforts. Please write, call, or email. See the contact information below.

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

International Steering Committee

Cory Aaron	BMWED #745	BNSF	St. Louis, MO
Chuck Abbate	SMART-TD #898b	KEOLIS	Boston, MA
Gabe Christenson	SMART-TD #1043	UP	Sparks, NV
Derek Masters	SMART-TD #1393	CSX	Buffalo, NY
Ross Grooters,	BLET #778	UP	Des Moines, IA
Hugh Sawyer	BLET #316	NS	Atlanta, GA
Cameron Slick	SMART-TD #1614	UP	Minneapolis, MN
Stu Wallenberg	SMART-TD #1433	CPKC	Chicago, IL
Matt Weaver	BMWED #2624	CSX	Toledo, OH
Nick Wurst	SMART-TD #1473	CSX	Framingham, MA

Alternates

Eric Basir	ATU #308	CTA	Chicago, IL
Ryan Black	SMART-TD #1433	CPKC	Chicago, IL
Alex Nantell	BRS #14	UP	Portland, OR
Tom Nelson	SMART-TD #1732	AMTK	Grand Rapids, MI
Tim Sloper	SMART-TD #768	NS	Decatur, IL

Trustees

Fritz Edler	BLET #482	AMTK	Washington, DC
Ron Kaminkow	BLET #51	AMTK	Reno, NV
Andy Weir	TCRC #240	CN	Sarnia, ON

www.railroadworkersunited.org • info@railroadworkersunited.org • 202-798-3327 or 202-RWU-DEBS
RWU P.O. Box 221191 Chicago, IL 60622



Summary of the Chicago RWU Meeting – April 12 & 13, 2025

After months of planning and discussion, RWU members, three staff, and a facilitator gathered in Chicago to assess current priorities and chart the future direction of Railroad Workers United. The group focused on identifying the most pressing campaigns in today's political climate, generating ideas for new initiatives, and developing strategies to grow RWU's membership.

Three major campaigns were highlighted over the weekend: the fight for public rail ownership, the defense of railroad retirement, and a new campaign to confront automation across the logistics industry. Participants emphasized the need to define automation broadly - not just in transportation, but across freight, passenger, and warehousing sectors - and to build a narrative that unites all affected workers. A committee will be formed to carry this work forward.



On Saturday, the Executive Committee of the Railroad Workers Education and Legal Defense Foundation voted to support *Public Rail Now* (PRN) branching off as an independent project from RWU's public ownership campaign. The committee committed to continued collaboration and support as PRN builds an advisory board and reaches out to stakeholder groups to expand its base of support within rail labor.



L-R: RWU Solidarity member and session facilitator, Gifford Hartman; Public Rail Now (PRN) Director, Tabitha Tripp; PRN Organizer Adam Barrington. Session participants discussed RWU's priorities and how to most effectively advance our objectives in the context of the increasingly challenging political climate.

Participants also discussed how frontline issues - such as long trains, job safety, and corporate control - intersect with the larger fight for public ownership and democratic control of the rail system.

The group addressed growing threats to retirement security, including attacks on the Social Security Administration and the closure of Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) offices (*Editor's Note: As this issue goes to press, the recent closing of RRB offices has been rescinded - for NOW!*) Members agreed on the urgent need to educate and mobilize around protecting the Railroad Retirement system in the face of looming threats and began outlining a proactive strategy.

Two organizing sessions led by RWU Membership Organizer Keegan Waller helped build skills and strengthen RWU's grassroots organizing capacity. Saturday's session included a training on six-step structured organizing conversations adapted from the *Organizing for Power* program, with role-playing and discussion on overcoming objections to joining RWU. Sunday's session focused on building local organizing committees, developing chapters, and workplace outreach.

Editorial

Railroad Retirement: A System Built by Workers - Slowly Dismantled by Washington

In an era where billionaires ride rockets for sport and the average American works longer for less, it should come as no surprise that the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB), an institution built by and for railroad workers, is now on the budgetary chopping block.

The latest proposed federal budget calls for a 21% cut to the RRB's administrative funding. On its face, that might sound like bureaucratic housekeeping. But for the people who've spent their lives hauling this country's freight, it's a gut punch. This isn't about shaving pennies off a balance sheet. It's about a deliberate slow-roll of neglect, one that turns retirement into a waiting game and reduces earned benefits into something you have to chase down like a missed connection.

Unlike Social Security, which receives its funding from the general tax pool, Railroad Retirement is funded directly through payroll taxes paid by rail workers and their employers. We fund it. We keep it solvent. And yet, Congress has routinely treated it like a side project, approving budgets that undercut the very agency responsible for delivering our benefits.

Field offices are already short-staffed. Hold times are measured

in hours, not minutes. Disability claims can take well over a year to process. Now imagine what happens when you hack a fifth off their budget. The plan is to close field offices, eliminate staff, and somehow improve service through sheer optimism. If that sounds familiar, it's because we've heard it before. Precision Scheduled Railroading dressed up in a federal suit.

There's a certain irony to all this. The same lawmakers who show up at our disaster sites with hard hats and camera crews now quietly pencil in cuts that leave retirees in the lurch. They'll call it streamlining. Efficiency. A necessary belt-tightening. But when a system is already running on fumes, cutting deeper isn't reform. It's sabotage.

Railroaders aren't asking for favors. We're asking for what's already ours. For decades, we've paid into a system built on the promise of dignity after a life of demanding work. That promise is starting to feel more like a polite suggestion.

And if history's taught us anything, it's this: When institutions stop working for working people, they don't crumble overnight. They just quietly stop returning your calls.



This Stop, Berlin

Editor's Note: This is another installment in a series of articles analyzing railroad operations and working conditions in various countries. For previous articles in this series see the Winter 2025 issue for the article on railroads in France; and the Fall 2024 issue for the article on the rails in Britain.

By Fred Naiden

Brothers, please feel at home. Berlin could be New York or Washington. A big company chartered by the government owns the right of way and operates the trains. The service is worse than it was 50 years ago, even if some of it is faster, and that's the same as in the States. The freight service is privately run, so that's the same, too. Don't compare it to New York. It's East Palestine waiting to happen.

Let's say that our conductor is a friend of mine but I was sure I'd confuse him when I tried to explain which union I belonged to. "Engineer," I started, "switchman, motorman" - and he smiled as he interrupted me. His engineer belongs to a union that represents the same three trades. He belongs to a union representing ALL the rest. Germany comes closer than any other big Western country to what Debs wanted for us - one big union. The Presidents of the Brotherhoods should come to Berlin and learn about brotherhood.

The German death rate is lower than ours and the work week is 35 hours. Good labor law accounts for some of this, and so does union zeal in policing contracts.

The German death rate is lower than ours and the work week is 35 hours. Good labor law accounts for some of this and so does union zeal in policing contracts. Maybe one advantage is due to Germany's maligned national character. The industry has never tried to impose Precision Scheduled Railroad. It prefers timetables. Germans still wear watches. Late trains were the main transport issue in the national election two months ago.

The government cares about railroads because it operates most of the industry, including some freight. The mistake was to assign the rest to public companies that act like the profiteering private railroads in Britain. They cut jobs and wages in order to cut costs. High-speed, fancy service suffered least, commuter service suffered more, and small-town service suffered most. In the years before unification, my friend said, a passenger in a German village could buy a ticket for any location in the Soviet Union and expect to arrive on time. Today a villager often cannot buy a ticket to take a train to the nearest German city - and even then the train is late.

An even bigger mistake was letting private firms operate most freight service. They cut thousands of jobs and imposed overtime. So many switches and towers were eliminated that crewmen could sleep on the job. Pick a 6 pm job, join the queue of waiting trains, nap, wake up at 6 am, and do a day's work for two days' pay. Then call the wife "if you still have one."

A generation ago the government was running a better railroad. The lines it inherited from East Germany were simple, sturdy, and well-

maintained. The worst feature was the East German policy of punishing workers for careless mistakes. The government was already running the railroads in West Germany. It had nationalized them decades earlier, as happened in Britain and France. The best feature of these roads, the Civil Service, continued after unification and put a stop to the punitive policy in the East.

Then the government began subsidizing cars more and trains less. Rather than raise taxes or fares, it set up public companies that acted like private ones for passenger and freight service. This spring German voters rebelled by doubling the vote for a populist party, *Alternativ für Deutschland (AfD)*, that promised to lower taxes and fares.

These utopian agendas were not the only reason that *AfD* failed to become part of the new governing coalition. *AdD* leaders observed that good railroads were one of Hitler's strong points. That irritated the Coalition leader, the Christian Democrats (CD), who are technocrats, not utopians, populists, or neo-Nazis. To win support from the political center, the CD is letting the public companies continue to improve service - if "improve" is the word - at the cost of more overtime, higher fares, and more fumes.

The new Secretary of Transportation concentrates on auto traffic, not train service, and gains headlines by promising to abolish speed limits in the passing lanes on German highways. She belongs to a small, centrist party. A Center-Left party, the Socialists, are in the coalition too. They had a good platform, but won't be in charge of transport and infrastructure.

The new coalition has not fired any top managers, as Trump did by firing the head of Amtrak. Steps like that would offend the Center and Center-Left and leave the Christian Democrats struggling to stay in power. Germany would find itself in the same trouble as France, where the government is not strong enough to privatize railroads and barely strong enough to survive.

Some of Germany's problems resemble ours. Germany's inadequate solutions offer us a warning: Public ownership is one thing and public, pro-labor control is another. One problem Germany has solved is putting labor voices in parliament. Germany's two parties on the Left, which are both pro-labor, received a total of 13% of the vote. Add the Social Democrats and the German Left and Center received 29%, more than the populists of *AfD*, which received 20%. Trade union unity was one reason for this showing. Another was good political writing in outlets like *Wildcat*, #110-13, which deals with labor relations on German railroads. #110 and #112 are available on-line in English.



Fred Naiden is a former motorman and locomotive engineer, TWU Local 100, RWU member and also a former history professor. His book about the subway, "Railroaded - A Motorman's Story of the Subway from Horse Cars to Covid," is forthcoming from the Rutgers University Press.





Analysis

Critique of the NTSB Report on East Palestine Tragedy - Part II

Editor's Note: This is the 2nd installment in a series of articles that takes a deep dive into the official government report on the causes of the tragic, devastating derailment in East Palestine, OH, on Feb. 3, 2023. The 1st installment ran in the Winter 2025 issue.

Railroad workers and the public depend on the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) to conduct a thorough, transparent investigation of such incidents. The NTSB is empowered to make necessary recommendations as applicable to prevent such incidents in the future. If the NTSB's investigation and conclusions omit critical factors - whether inadvertently or intentionally - we should all take notice, be concerned and call it out.

By Jeff Kurtz

In the Winter 2025 edition of *The Highball*, we examined the size of the train involved in the East Palestine derailment and how the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) dismissed the possibility of the train's weight and length contributing to the accident. Now, we delve into Norfolk Southern's (NS) own rules and procedures to uncover how they may have played a role in the derailment of Train 32N. A critical factor was the use of Trip Optimizer in operating Train 32N.

Trip Optimizer, classified as an energy management system (EMS), functions akin to cruise control for trains. However, its true purpose seems to lean toward reducing reliance on human operators. The problem is that EMS lacks the ability to adjust freight trains in a way that minimizes in-train forces (slack), a vital aspect of safe operations.

Slack refers to the play between each car. The amount of slack differs depending on the type of car. But a conservative estimate is that a 150-car train can have at least 75' feet of slack. It is one of the challenges of a locomotive engineer to control that slack. If all the slack of the 18,000-ton train runs in (buff force) or runs out (draft force) uncontrollably there could be problems.

Moreover, EMS systems often fail when faced with complex scenarios, relinquishing control to the human engineer at critical moments. This handover presents significant challenges. Transitioning from an EMS to manual operation requires engineers to regain control of the in-train forces, a skill that demands consistent practice - similar to mastering an instrument or sport.

Controlling a long, heavy train with hands-on operation is challenging enough on a good day. To jump into the middle of a situation - quite possibly less than ideal - without a real feel for the physical forces at work is problematic, to say the least. Yet, NS rules mandate the use of EMS, deskilling engineers by depriving them of the necessary repetitions to refine this skill set. Deskilling increases the time required to manage slack or can, in severe cases, make it unsafe to handle such transitions.

Another overlooked issue lies in rail carrier rulebooks, including NS, which prioritize dynamic braking as the preferred method because it can save a few bucks in fuel consumption. Engineers can face discipline for excessive air brake use, despite air brakes being more effective at controlling slack.

Dynamic braking involves slowly reducing the throttle (taking your foot off the gas) and applying a powerful electro-pneumatic force to slow the locomotives, gently bunching the slack. It can be effective with sufficient time to plan ahead, on cooperative terrain, with sufficient horsepower/ampage and everything is under control. It is less than ideal to use in a potential crisis

East Palestine, OH, residents expressing themselves to VP J.D. Vance during his visit on the 2nd anniversary of the tragic derailment.



Implementing the Stafford Act would declare East Palestine a federal emergency and authorize necessary funding the victims desperately need for cleanup, relocation and healthcare coverage.

scenario. When unplanned, the potential exists for the 150 railcars (1.8 miles long), each weighing approximately 140 tons, to bounce around like unstable ping-pong balls (like an 18,000 ton slinky) over two miles of terrain. This inconsistent braking amplifies the risk of unforeseen events spiraling into a catastrophe.

In contrast, air brakes apply braking force to each individual car, albeit a few seconds per car. After a minimum brake application allows the slack to gently adjust, subsequent applications ultimately, uniformly and efficiently slow the entire train. In the case of Train 32N, dynamic braking proved particularly problematic given the train's underpowered configuration.

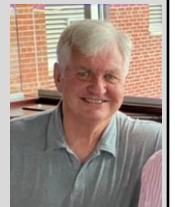
The engineer faced an almost insurmountable task. His crew included a newly promoted conductor with only seven to eight months of experience, who was further occupied with training a brand-new hire. Under these circumstances, the engineer received a warning about a hot bearing one minute and 25 seconds before the derailment.

Instead of promptly applying air brakes - which could have significantly mitigated the impact or possibly prevented the derailment - the engineer had to disengage from Trip Optimizer, attempt to control the slack, and rely on insufficient dynamic brakes - in relation to the 18,000 tons - to slow the train.

The train's Event Recorder indicated that during this window, it only decelerated by 1 to 2 miles per hour. The pressure to adhere to NS rules, which prioritize cost-saving over safety, further complicated the engineer's efforts.

The crew's performance, given the circumstances, was commendable. However, they were let down by the NS rulebook and corporate practices, which prioritized profit over thorough inspections and direct communication with the train crew. Instead of issuing the hot bearing warning directly to the crew, it was routed to a central desk, delaying critical action. Additionally, the NTSB failed to investigate these operational challenges, focusing instead on inward-facing cameras - a measure more likely to exacerbate accidents than prevent them. The absence of consultation with railroad employees who perform the actual work reflects a missed opportunity to identify safer practices.

Jeff Kurtz hired out on the Santa Fe Railroad as a Fireman in April, 1974. A BLET union officer most of his career, he was President of Division 391, Fort Madison, IA, for 8 years and Iowa State Legislative Board Chairman for 10 years. He retired from BNSF in December 2014. He's been a Trustee for the Lee County Labor Chapter and was elected to State Representative from Lee County, IA, in 2018. Currently, he's a member of the Justice for East Palestine Residents and Workers Coalition.





Commentary

When the Going Gets Tough - the Tough Get Going (I HOPE!)

By Mark Burrows

In the closing paragraph of my commentary in the Winter 2025 issue of *The Highball*, "Why Do We Put Up With This Sordid State of Affairs?!", I alluded to the imminent, incoming Trump administration - at that time a few days away from the inauguration. Little did I know how prescient my speculation would end up being when I wrote, "Buckle up and strap yourself in. It's quite possible that we will all be embarking on a journey into uncharted territory - whether we asked for it or not."

Now I'm not claiming to be some kind of working class soothsayer. C'mon, they gave us all the answers to the quiz in their Project 2025 manifesto. Even though they told us up front what they were going to do, I confess to being a tad overwhelmed by the over-the-top "shock and awe" of it all. The "best" part is they're just getting warmed up. On again — off again Trump "whisperer" Steve Bannon calls for Trump and his gang of merry men to "flood the zone." It feels more like a nuclear tsunami.

The threats to Social Security, Medicare, etc., the layoffs of federal workers, the gutting of the EPA, FDA, USDA etc. - government agencies that protect our air, water and food - and so many other attacks/cutbacks are all part of DOGE, the creation of Elon Musk, the wealthiest human in the universe. Less FRA inspectors = an already dangerous occupation on a good day, under the best of conditions, becomes even worse. In order to compensate for the reduced tax income for the federal Treasury, compliments of Trump's tax cuts for the wealthiest, they have to take it out of our hides. Isn't that special?!

On a certain level this really isn't anything new. The redistribution of wealth from the working class to the ruling class has been going on for decades. In the 1980s President Reagan championed "trickle-down economics": Give the wealthy an even bigger piece of the pie with tax cuts and increased exploitation on the job, and the wealthy will nobly honor their civic duty by investing in more factories, creating more jobs and building a capitalist utopia. So how has that worked out?

According to my trusty, AI Research Assistant, citing economic studies from Yale University and Berkeley University:

1950s-1960s: Wealth was more evenly distributed compared to today. The top 1% held approximately 25% of the nation's wealth.

Present Day: The top 1% now controls over 40% of the nation's wealth. The top 0.1% has seen a dramatic increase, holding over 20% of wealth compared to less than 10% in the 1980s. Meanwhile, the middle class has seen its share of wealth decline significantly. In 1990, the middle 60% held 37% of wealth, but by 2022, this had dropped to 26%. These shifts highlight growing inequality, driven by factors like changes in tax policies, asset returns, and economic dynamics over time.

Most anti-Trump rants elsewhere devolve into cheerleading spectacles for the Democratic Party (DP). Anyone who has read even a few of my commentaries knows that I've despised the Democrats ever since I began to connect-the-dots and figure things out 45 years ago. The Republicans racism and anti-unionism is on full frontal display. At least they don't insult us anymore by trying to hide it. But to watch the Democrats whine and complain about the "big, bad meanie Trump", is possibly the most pathetic, grotesque political grandstanding I've ever seen.

Democratic administrations and politicians have presided over this government sanctioned thievery over the decades, while

successfully selling the ideological snake oil that they are the "champions of the working class." In 2016 they fought harder to rob Senator Bernie Sanders of the nomination than they fought against Trump - even though the polls showed Sanders could have defeated Trump. So the DP served us up on a silver platter for Trump Part 1. Then they screwed Sanders out of the nomination in 2020, giving us "Sleepy Joe", who then politically morphed into Kamala Harris. I can't fault fellow workers who were so justifiably disgusted by Clinton, Biden and Harris that they voted for Trump as an alternative - albeit desperate IMO. In essence, the DP served us up on a silver platter for Trump Part II.

Worse than the economic attacks are the assaults on our civil liberties. That's part of the plan because they know there will be resistance to their policies. As this issue goes to press, the government sanctioned kidnapping of migrants and sending them to a notorious torture chamber in El Salvador WITHOUT DUE PROCESS, is in the news - especially the plight of the SMART union Brother, Kilmar Armando Abrego Garcia.

In addition to this travesty are the cases of the two Columbia University Palestinian students, Mahmoud Khalil and Mohsen Mahdawi and Tufts University Turkish student Rumeysa Ozturk. Secretary of State Rubio proclaims that they are a threat to US foreign policy, even though their publicly stated positions pretty much align, as do mine, with the Pope's position that he expressed in his Easter Sunday sermon shortly before he passed.

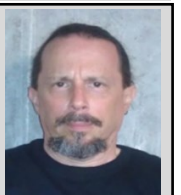
The Trump administration accuses anyone who opposes their genocidal slaughter in Gaza as being anti-Semitic, while his best buddy - for now anyway - Elon Musk proudly does the Heil Hitler salute at a public event a while back. Not to be outdone, Trump's sometime-buddy Bannon did the same several days later. They just flat out LIE! Dishonest, deceitful politicians are nothing new but the consequences and the boundaries being pushed are. This is authoritarian, police-state governance.

So what does this have to do with rails? The government preemptively busting rail strikes is now the norm. Try to defy a presidential back-to-work order and you'll be labeled a domestic terrorist and put on the next flight to El Salvador. Today you can't be fired without an investigation - AKA "due process." Soon you'll be escorted off the property just for rolling your eyes at the train master. That's where this is headed if we don't organize, through our unions, in alliance with the rest of the working class to stand up for our rights and dignity, as workers and as human beings.

We, the working class and our allies, need to organize independently of the bosses'/rulers'/billionaires' political parties. We need to fight for a foreign policy, an economic policy and ultimately a society and government that reflects our interests and our morals - as opposed to theirs. The legacy of Eugene V. Debs is more relevant than ever today. @ railroadworkersunited.org - click "More Info" - "Eugene V. Debs." I suggest "You Railroad Men" and the "Canton Speech" as great places to start.

Editor's Note: The viewpoints expressed here are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the positions of RWU

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.





Editorial

Any Proposed Privatization of Amtrak: Bad for Passengers and Rail Workers

Amtrak is under attack by the federal government, which is threatening to privatize the closest thing that the US has to a national passenger rail service. Based on countless examples from our past and around the world, we know what privatization means: selling off, for pennies on the dollar, assets that are owned by the public, and are in some way administered by democratically elected bodies, or people appointed by democratically elected bodies.

Once in the possession of private ownership, they will scour operations to find any place to cut costs and increase revenue in order to make their acquisition start turning a profit. This will come in the form of cuts to payroll, cuts to the budgets for maintenance of infrastructure and equipment, and ending the least profitable routes. This means less reliable service, or even the ending of service, for passengers, more unsafe conditions for passengers, workers, and trackside communities, and the loss of good paying, unionized jobs that pay into the Railroad Retirement system.

It's the same fundamental playbook used in all industries known by many names: rationalization, streamlining, running lean, doing more with less, "Precision Scheduled Railroading". In some ways, if Amtrak is privatized, it will be following its freight sister, Conrail, into the grave nearly three decades later. When railroads in the northeast ran themselves into the ground in the 1970s, the federal government stepped in and created Amtrak and Conrail to continue to provide rail service. Veteran railroaders can attest to the disaster that followed as CSX and NS carved up Conrail in 1999. It's not a coincidence that Amtrak had record high ridership and ticket revenue in 2024, and Conrail was privatized and sold off as it became more and more successful.

HOW CAN RAILROAD WORKERS FIGHT BACK?

Many railroad unions have come out with statements opposing the privatization of Amtrak because they recognize that the private ownership of Amtrak would be bad for their members, and that continued public ownership is preferable? At RWU, we've known this and have been advancing this idea by initiating and participating in the Public Rail Now campaign, including sponsoring research which details the catastrophic results of privatization of passenger rail in other countries, and the potential benefits of public ownership of the freight rail system in North America. If public ownership is better for passenger rail, why not freight? Why should the rail unions support public ownership of Amtrak, but not the Class 1 freight railroads? Read more and consider joining the campaign at publicrailnow.org

The good news is that railroad workers are not powerless, but actually have the key to fight back against Amtrak privatization, attacks on the Railroad Retirement system, and all the plans of the railroad companies and their allies in DC. While the unions seem to have placed their hopes in the lawyers, and the politicians, many of whom are more than happy to turn around and take the companies political donations after they take our unions money. The real key is the rank-and-file membership of the unions: railroad workers.

Right now, thousands of federal workers whose union rights are under attack are planning protests to let the administration know exactly what they think of their plans for them. Why not call out railroad workers to join these rallies, and ask for the support of these other workers to defend Amtrak? Why not organize our

own protests in cities with large concentrations of railroad workers? Why not organize an informational picket at Amtrak terminals around the country, passing out leaflets to passengers about why they should oppose the privatization effort. These are tactics that can be used for regional and commuter as well as freight workforces on all kinds of questions, not just privatization.

Ultimately, to defend members' jobs and conditions, our unions need to get creative...

FOR THE FUTURE: HOW CAN RAILROADERS TAKE WORKPLACE ACTION?

Ultimately, to defend members' jobs and conditions, our unions need to get creative and be ready to do more, including figuring out how to organize workplace actions. Oftentimes railroad workers are told we can't strike. Fortunately for us, the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) has proven this wrong. They also fall under the Railway Labor Act (RLA), and have developed a strike strategy called CHAOS: Create Havoc Around Our System. CHAOS works by creating a strike threat, but not revealing which flight crews would be striking. The threat of the strike does half of the work, causing many passengers to cancel their flights in anticipation of disruptions. CHAOS allowed the flight attendants to target single flights or terminals with intermittent strikes where they thought they could have the most effect, while keeping the element of surprise. A federal court upheld that AFA had the right, under the RLA, to organize these strikes. You can read more about CHAOS at afacwa.org/chaos.

HANDS OFF AMTRAK!

Keep Passenger Rail Public

railroadworkersunited.org

CHAOS has only been tested in the context of a contract battle, with a private sector employer, and in the airline industry. Our unions need to investigate whether CHAOS tactics could be adapted to the railroads for future battles, calling out the members to strike hot trains, key shops, gangs and/or terminals. It may be that it can't, but what is important is that the AFA arrived at CHAOS tactics by trying to think creatively about how to organize worker action under the RLA. It is important for our unions to start thinking creatively, like the AFA did, in order to come up with tactics that we, as railroad workers, can use to fight for good contracts, and against attacks, such as privatization, rules changes, contract violations, etc. We shouldn't leave the future of Amtrak workers, or any railroad workers, to politicians and lawyers when we - the workforce - are the best hope to fight back.



Let Them Know How You Really Feel!

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

RWU Online Store

www.railworkersunited.storenvy.com

Or order by mail with a check or money order to:
Railroad Workers United
PO Box 32
Roopville, GA 30170-0032

**Hands Off
Railroad
Retirement
No Cuts to Rail
Workers Pensions**
railroadworkersunited.org

"I am opposing a social order in which it is possible for one man who does absolutely nothing that is useful to amass a fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars, while millions of men and women who work all the days of their lives secure barely enough for a wretched existence."

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!

Socialism Conference 2025

RWU has participated in the annual Socialism Conference, sponsored by Haymarket Books, in Chicago, for the last several years. It is an opportunity to interact with hundreds of social justice fighters and activists - 2,000+ are expected - from around the country and some international participants.

This year RWU will be hosting a session titled: *"Eugene Debs: From Rail Labor Organizer to Socialist Agitator - Lessons for Today"* that will include Allison Duerk, Director of the Eugene V. Debs Museum in Terre Haute, IN. The conference will be held over the July 4th weekend in Chicago, IL.

From the Socialism Conference 2025 website:

The far right ascends around the globe amid war and wildfires.

The coming period promises more and deeper crises, but also to ignite mass social movements with increasing frequency. It is a crucial time for the left to come together and build durable organizations, coalitions, and relationships.

At this critical juncture, the Socialism 2025 Conference will be a vital gathering space for organizers and activists to sharpen analysis, hone strategy, and build community.

A four day conference featuring 100+ participatory discussions, lectures, debates, and workshops organized by groups from all



over the country, the Socialism Conference will facilitate exchanges between existing activists and organizations while also welcoming people new to the left. Join us in Chicago, July 3-6, for Socialism 2025!

Featured speakers at Socialism 2025 will include:

Boots Riley, Robin D.G. Kelley, Harsha Walia, Eve L. Ewing, Kim TallBear, Omar Barghouti, Dean Spade, Sarah Schulman, Kali Akuno, Lorgia García Peña, Chenjerai Kumanyika, Sophie Lewis, Daniel Denvir, Richard Seymour, Adom Getachew, Jesse Hagopian, Eric Blanc, Glen Coulthard, Micha Frazer-Carroll, Paisley Currah, Mikaela Loach, and many more.

The Socialism Conference is brought to you by Haymarket Books and dozens of endorsing left-wing organizations and publications. Visit socialismconference.org to learn more and register today.