

POLITICAL COMMITTEE MEETING No. 47, November 18, 1977

Present: Barnes, Blackstock, Breitman, Clark, Garza, Hawkins, Heisler, Horowitz, Jaquith, D. Jenness, Jones, LaMont, Levine, Lovell, Rodríguez, Seigle, Stapleton, White

Guest: Britton

Chair: Rodríguez

AGENDA: 1. Rail Perspectives
2. World Movement

1. RAIL PERSPECTIVES

(Henderson and Rose invited for this point.)

Heisler reported. (See attached.)

Discussion

Motion: To approve.

Carried.

2. WORLD MOVEMENT

(Feldman, Foley, Hansen, Novack and Prince invited for this point.)

Barnes reported.

Discussion

Motion: To approve the report.

Carried.

Meeting adjourned.

Rail Perspectives

By Ed Heisler, November 18, 1977

This past week we've had discussions in the trade union steering committee and the secretariat and have some proposals for stepping up our work in the rail unions.

We have reprinted a Militant article on contract negotiations so you'd have some background information. (Militant, July 29, 1977, "Collision Course," attached.) We outlined what the carriers are attempting to do now against the rail unions and explained in some detail changing relations between the union officials and the rail bosses.

For five years we had a period of relative peace in the rail industry. Rail workers won some real improvements in their wages and working conditions and there was relatively full employment. Now, the carriers are proposing the most serious attack in several decades on working conditions and wages of rail workers.

They want to cut the actual wages of railroad workers, they want to cut the number of jobs, they want to change union work rules, they want to take away the very limited right to strike that railroad workers have presently under the Railway Labor Act. They want contract provisions saying that when a union organizes a legal strike against one railroad, all railroads would have the right to impose any wages, working conditions, or work rules they wish--essentially tear up union contracts and impose new conditions.

The employer demands were served first (in June) against the two unions that represent train crew workers, the United Transportation Union and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. But they are now extending that attack against other rail workers, those who work in the shops, signalmen, railway clerks, etc.

The union officials' first reaction was, "You can't be serious," or "Are you serious about this?" and the carriers have told them in no uncertain terms, "Yes, we are completely serious." The railroad companies have a national bargaining unit called the National Railway Labor Conference. Some of the carriers have broken away from this bargaining unit, not because they don't want to go ahead with these proposals for drastic cuts, but because they are hungrier and want even more drastic cuts. They don't think the National Railway Labor Conference is going far enough. Conrail, the biggest railroad, employing 20 percent of the rail workers in this country, has pulled out. The Chicago-Northwestern, the Rock Island Line, the Milwaukee Road, and several other railroads have also pulled out. They want more serious cuts and to give you just one example, the Rock Island Line is proposing that engineers work, sleep, and eat on a train for thirty days straight. They would put on a special car where they will sleep and eat, and work them thirty days straight up and down the Rock Island Line system from Chicago to New Orleans. And that's a serious proposal.

Before the carriers announced their demands, there were signs the

companies were planning a major attack. One of the clearest signs was what occurred last spring with track workers, members of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees on Conrail in eastern Pennsylvania. By agreement between the general chairman of the union and Conrail management, some track gangs were forced to work an eighty-hour workweek at straight-time pay. No overtime pay. Seven days a week. Then they get a week off. And then they're back on another eighty-hour week at straight-time pay.

Also last spring, Conrail laid off 1,200 out of 12,000 shop craft workers in order to impose speedup and cut their wage bill.

Right now train crew workers, UTU members, on the Long Island Railroad have been working without a contract for nineteen months. The Long Island Railroad is trying to cut the size of those train crews, so where there are now three crew members on each train in addition to the engineer, they would pull one person off the job. The union followed all of the delaying provisions of the Railway Labor Act and technically and legally has the right to strike, but now they are told that they come under the New York State Taylor Law, which outlaws strikes by public employees.

We've received reports in recent months from a number of rail workers around the country of a tremendous increase in harassment and intimidation by the carriers against individual workers, especially union militants. There have been many suspensions and firings. One example we know of is a member of a grievance committee of a UTU local in Chicago who is simply trying to carry out his union duties--he's not particularly militant or class-conscious. He has been suspended four times this year and been able to work only about thirty days on the railroad--they suspended him on the most minor alleged rule violations while he was trying to do his job.

These attacks on rail workers are part of the general antilabor offensive which has picked up a lot of steam in recent years. We have seen more naked union-busting as in the case of the Washington Post Pressmen strike in D.C. and with the Meat Cutters in Milwaukee where strikebreakers were brought in and broke that union. And, of course, there is the big attack coming down on the Mine Workers and on public employees.

The rail carriers are aware of the progress they and other employers have made in their antilabor offensive and this has whetted their appetites.

Although the rail contracts for all practical purposes expire December 31, things won't come to a head then. The Mine Workers have a principle of "no contract, no work," but that doesn't happen in rail. Because of the Railway Labor Act and all of its built-in delaying procedures, it could actually be a year or longer before developments would lead to a strike or a threatened strike by the union officialdom.

The party has made a modest but serious beginning toward building a national rail fraction. In terms of numbers, for example, we are much stronger now than we were in 1969-71 when we were active in the Right to Vote Committee in the United Transportation Union. At that

time our fraction consisted of a small handful, primarily in Chicago. We now have nineteen comrades in rail and two functioning fractions, one in Chicago of nine comrades in shop crafts and the UTU, and the other in Philadelphia, where we have three comrades in the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees.

These comrades and some others scattered around the country are getting out our ideas and bringing people around the party. We are making party contacts, selling subscriptions to the Militant, getting some of these rail workers to our forums and other party activities, selling books like Farrell's books on the Teamster battles, and other literature rail workers are interested in on the Black struggle and women's liberation, etc.

This work is quite different from what we were able to do when we were active in the Right to Vote Committee. We had few party contacts then although we tried. The fact is that rail workers are more receptive now to what the party has to say--to our publications and press, to our ideas, our general class-struggle approach, than they were back then. As an example, we just recruited a rail worker in Toledo, a woman in the Clerks union--a socialist and a feminist.

So we think we have opportunities now to do party-building work in rail. To make some friends and some recruits to the party.

A number of branches are making a conscious effort to try to get comrades in the railroad industry. We want to step up this colonization in rail.

We should take note of a couple advantages we have in rail that we don't have in other industries. First, we have a recent tradition and history of work. The Right to Vote Committee in the UTU was a big movement. It got workers in action around the issue of the right to vote on their contracts. It actually succeeded in English Canada and Québec in winning that right for 20,000 UTU members. And we came close to winning at the '71 convention of the UTU.

Party members played an important role in the Right to Vote Committee. We still have contact with rank-and-file UTU members and local officers we worked with in that committee, people who know us, people who have some respect for what we helped accomplish in the rail industry not so long ago.

Our pamphlet A Struggle for Union Democracy--The Story of the Right to Vote Committee in the United Transportation Union was published a year ago but is more popular among rail workers now than it was a year ago. Some rail workers who read it ask for more copies to sell to co-workers.

Recently, I got a call from an officer of a big UTU local in Michigan. Now UTU locals aren't all that big--the average local is roughly 150 to 200 members. A big local is 300 or 350 members. This particular local has some 600 members, 100 of whom have been laid off recently.

This officer, who like all local rail union officers works a job

and is not full time for the union, called to say he liked the pamphlet and wants me to speak to his local on the carriers' demands and any ideas I might have on what should be done to fight the companies.

I'm going to be visiting with him soon and in all likelihood will accept his invitation to speak to his local in the next month. He thinks he can have a big turnout for that meeting. At the last meeting he said 300 members showed up, a huge turnout for a UTU local--even in a strike situation you usually don't have anything like that kind of turnout.

So that's one advantage we have--the fact that we have some authority based on what we did in the Right to Vote Committee. And we have a second advantage in that we don't run into our opponents much in rail. The Communist Party has only a few people in rail, and the CP didn't support the Right to Vote Committee. They publish a little newsletter called Railroad Notes, which isn't read by many railroad workers.

The Revolutionary Communist Party recently organized a conference to launch a "national workers organization." They had workshops on many industries, major and minor, but one was conspicuously absent--rail. We can assume they have nothing or next to nothing in rail or they would have had a workshop.

So that's another advantage we have--we don't have to compete with a lot of opponents in the rail industry. We don't run into many rail workers who have had bad experiences with other radicals, with our opponents.

So we propose that we take steps to increase the size of our fraction in rail. We'd like to set up fractions in major rail terminals where we have branches. And we want to get some leading comrades into rail to help set the example and show we're serious about this move. We want to get more Black comrades into rail. In Philadelphia we haven't had a problem getting women in--our fraction is entirely women.

As we're beefing up our fraction in coming months, we want to join with other rail workers to carry out a test to see if a response can be generated against the carriers' attacks. So far, there has been no significant organized opposition to the carriers or their labor lieutenants.

We have been in contact with a few rail workers in North Dakota, Minnesota, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New Jersey who want to try to get out some ideas on what should be done to fight the carriers' attacks. They have been working on putting out an issue of a newsletter called Railroadworkers Fight Back with articles written by rail workers, in most cases local officers of different unions, describing some of the recent attacks that have come down. The main feature of this newsletter will be a "Call to all Railroadworkers to defend our unions." This "Call" will point to the seriousness of the carriers' attacks and say that it is time for all railroad workers from all crafts to unite through the existing unions, to resist the carriers' attacks. The "Call" will propose that meetings be organized, called by locals, lodges, union officers from all the different crafts--joint meetings wherever possible

--to exchange ideas on how to defend the unions from these attacks.

The "Call" will say that all union members and representatives need complete and regular reports on the status of the negotiations with the carriers. These sessions are held behind closed doors--no real reports are given to the membership or to secondary officials. The "Call" points out that the carriers get complete detailed reports of everything that's discussed in these sessions, and that rail workers have a right to the same information--the "right to know."

The "Call" will also stress the need for the right of all rail workers to vote on any tentative agreements or settlements that are made with the carriers--the right to vote on contracts.

Those who agree with these ideas will be asked to pass out copies of the newsletter to co-workers on their railroad and to workers on other railroads.

The rail workers who are initiating this newsletter plan only one issue--it's a test. They don't know what the response will be and it doesn't make much sense to speculate.

We do know that the rail union bureaucracy shows signs of being worried. Al Chesser, the international president of the UTU, recently gave a speech about the carrier demands at a regional meeting made up mainly of local UTU officers. He warns about "soapbox orators" in the railroad shanties, which may indicate that there is a little bit of orating going on. And he also told the general chairmen--these are top union officers, not international officers but just a step below that--he warned them, now don't try during these negotiations to "out militant one another." And at another regional meeting--this one in Thief River Falls, Minnesota--Chesser launched a red-baiting attack on the Railroad-workers Fight Back newsletter.

In order to better assess our initial work and give it a push forward, we propose consulting with our comrades in rail on the possibility of a national rail gathering, perhaps during the YSA convention in Detroit. One advantage of that timing would be that many branch and local organizers and national field organizers will be present.

If we are able to go ahead with the Detroit gathering, it will be a good opportunity to discuss with the organizers our need to also step up our colonization of auto. Reports from Detroit make it clear we can get out our ideas for changing society and changing the union and win people to our party.



COLLISION COURSE

Railroads demand wage cuts, attack union safety rules

By Ed Heisler

In January the United Transportation Union announced its demands in upcoming negotiations with the railroads.

The UTU is the biggest of the twenty-one different rail unions. It represents 190,000 train crew workers, including all conductors, brakemen, switchmen, firemen, and some engineers. Current rail union contracts are open to renegotiation on January 1, 1978.

Ed Heisler is a member of the Socialist Workers Party national committee. A railroad worker and UTU activist for ten years, Heisler was a leader of the

struggle between 1969 and 1972 to win the right of union members to vote on their contracts.



The UTU, Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLE), and most other rail unions are asking for a 45 percent wage increase over a three-year period, plus a modest improvement in the union's cost-of-living clause.

In June the National Railway Labor Conference, the employer bargaining group representing most of the railroads, responded with demands of their own.

They are proposing wage cuts, drastic changes in union work rules, reductions in the size of railroad train crews, and other measures to reduce the living standards of railroad workers.

Beatrice Burgoon, director of the Labor Department's Office of Labor-Management Relations Services, described the employers' demands as "the most sweeping attempt on crews and work rules since 1959."

This threat by the railroad owners signals an end to "labor peace" in the industry.

'Project 70's'

When Al Chesser took over as UTU international president in January 1972, he announced a program dubbed "Project 70's," using the company-inspired slogan, "Better Jobs Through Industry Growth."

This program of open collaboration with the rail bosses supposedly marked a historic step forward for the union—a step that would result in unheard-of benefits for UTU members.

In a pamphlet widely circulated to union members at that time, Chesser told rail workers that "the time has come to change our outlook."

"We want an end to the warfare that has characterized this union too long," he said.

Chesser sat down with some railroad presidents to discuss his proposal for labor-management cooperation.

Under the deal worked out at that time, rail workers received badly needed wage increases, earlier retirement, and higher pensions. In return, the top UTU brass made concessions

on work rules. Later that year, they also permitted the railroads to eliminate most firemen.

Until now, the companies have not pushed for further major work-rule changes or other union concessions.

So Chesser and other UTU bureaucrats have been preaching labor peace with the employers.

Government handouts

During those 1972 talks, the employers pressed Chesser to help them get the one thing they wanted most: billions of dollars in government handouts to build up their capital funds at taxpayers' expense.

The companies asked for official union backing for their scheme to rob the public treasury. And they got it.

Chesser supported their appeal for federal aid. He even bragged about the hard bargain he had struck.

"I . . . told these gentlemen," Chesser said, "that at that time we had no intention of supporting any carrier [railroad] program as long as we, as employees, were being subjected to the kinds of treatment that we were receiving at the hands of their officials."

Chesser pointed to some of the serious problems UTU members faced:

- "Deliberate contract violations."
- "Refusal to hire new employees and working present employees excessively long hours."
- "Harassing employees because of on-duty personal injuries."
- "Intimidation of employees."
- "Unwarranted and frivolous investigations" of alleged minor infractions of company rules.
- "Refusal to correct hazardous conditions."
- "Seniority rules and craft lines ignored."

Chesser warned, "We will no longer stand for the type of harassment and cheap practices that have prevailed, and still give of our time and effort to promote the programs of management. . . . We are ready and willing to give that aid and assistance upon being furnished proof that the hostility and vindictiveness of the past have been laid to rest."

Easily persuaded

It didn't take very much convincing—much less *deeds* by railroad management—to persuade Chesser that the employers had changed their ways and were now looking out for the best interests of rail workers.

Within weeks after Chesser's brave

words, he and other UTU bureaucrats began to lobby in Washington, D.C., for every piece of legislation the companies wanted.

The UTU officials supported the Regional Rail Reorganization Act of 1973, which set up the United States Railway Association. USRA was responsible for planning and financing the restructuring of seven major "bankrupt" railroads in the northeast into the Consolidated Rail Corporation, or Conrail.

The rail bosses also rammed through Congress—again with Chesser's backing—the Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Reform Act of 1976. This law allocated \$2.1 billion for Conrail. It also authorized \$1 billion in loan guarantees for plant and equipment, as well as hundreds of millions of dollars in handouts to other railroads for track improvements and other work.

In a second printing of the "Project 70's" pamphlet, published in 1976, Chesser assessed the "progress" of the project.

'Just great'

According to him, things were just great. The following gains had allegedly been made by the membership.

1) "Settlement of the fireman-manning issue."

"We have concluded a historic agreement which disposed of the fireman-manning issue," Chesser said, calling the agreement "an example of what can be done when both sides work to find solutions."

The issue was certainly disposed of. How? By disposing of firemen. They lost their jobs under the agreement!

2) "Improvement in labor-management relations."

Chesser was vague on just how relations had improved. He had to be, because nothing had.

All the major problems facing rail workers remained.

Contract violations have not ended. Workers are still forced to work overtime when it isn't necessary.

UTU members are still harassed and intimidated by the companies, with thousands suspended and fired each year for the slightest rule infractions. (Union militants are often victimized in this way by selective enforcement of company rules.)

And most rail yards are still unclean and dangerous to work in.

Nothing has changed for the better.

3) "Establishment of ConRail and USRA to help the industry."

These programs certainly have helped the industry, but not the

workers. In fact, some track gangs rebuilding Conrail's right-of-way are being forced to work an eighty-hour week at straight-time pay! Many track workers have lost their jobs.

That's progress?

Conrail laid off 1,200 shopmen this spring in order to impose speedup. In addition to these attacks, Conrail is threatening to abandon hundreds of miles of track. This will cause many other rail workers to lose their jobs.

Any more "progress" of this sort and we'll all be out in the street looking for work.

Benefits for some

While railroaders are suffering under USRA and Conrail, some UTU officials are doing OK. James Burke, an international UTU vice-president, was appointed to USRA's board of directors. He's collecting a cool \$300 a day for "expenses," while continuing to draw a fat salary and expense account from the UTU.

4) "Joint labor-management safety committees."

These committees are a joke. Railroad fatalities and injuries remain very high. Railroading is one of the most dangerous jobs around.

The union membership needs—but still does not have—safety committees controlled by the union. Such committees should have the power to shut down any unsafe operation until the dangerous condition is corrected.

But today, if a UTU member or other rail worker refuses to perform work because of an unsafe condition, that worker risks being suspended or fired for insubordination. Safe working conditions will have to be imposed on the railroads by democratically elected union safety committees.

5) "Three Presidential appointments of UTU officers to high national positions."

This really has Chesser and the other UTU brass excited. Chesser would like to get a comfortable job with the government or a railroad when he retires in 1979. His predecessor, Charles Luna, is now a member of the board of directors of Amtrak.

He's become a boss!

These appointments have not increased the power of the union membership, only the pay of past or present UTU officials.

All in all, "Project 70's" was a plan to help the bosses, not railroad workers. Sen. Henry Jackson (D-Wash.) spelled it out when he told delegates to the 1975 UTU convention, "The whole railroad industry has benefitted from Project 70's, the pio-

neering program of labor-management cooperation that Al Chesser designed."

"Project 70's" is a fraud. The railroad owners got just what they wanted out of the incompetent and company-minded union bureaucrats, while UTU members got nothing from the deal.

But today the companies feel that they no longer need the help of the union brass on Capitol Hill or anywhere else—except to impose conditions dictated by them on the workers.

What do the railroads want in the negotiations now opening up? The sun and the moon if they can get it.

Company demands today

They want major cuts in the size of train crews. Current union rules require most trains to have a crew of four, including an engineer, conductor, and two brakemen on road trains, or two switchmen in yard service.

Now the railroads are demanding "the unrestricted right, under any and all circumstances" to set the size of crews in order "to put an end to hiring new people." In most cases, they want to cut one crew member off each job. This would eliminate many thousands of jobs.

According to the railroad owners, full train crews are terrible because they are too costly and "lock personnel into positions in which they cannot realize their full potential."

This jargon simply means having three people do the work of four—good old-fashioned speedup and more work, with no regard for safety.

Wage cut

The companies are also proposing a drastic cut in the wages of all workers.

Currently, road train crews are paid on a mileage and time basis. They receive a full day's pay for a 100-mile trip, that is, 100 miles equals eight hours' pay.

Many road crews are on longer runs. If they travel 150 miles, they are paid for a day and a half—twelve hours' pay at the straight-time rate.

When runs are completed in less than eight hours, rail workers are guaranteed a full day's pay.

But under the carriers' new proposal, road crews would only be paid for actual time worked. According to the June 27 *Business Week*, this "would, in effect, reduce wage rates."

The employers also want to end the long-established practice of paying all yard crew employees eight hours' wages when called to work, even if their assigned tasks are finished in less than eight hours.

The companies now want the right to send workers home and pay them only for actual time worked.

If they succeed, the railroads could use this rule to penalize union militants by working them only thirty minutes or so, and then sending them home after having made only three or four bucks for the day.

As if that weren't enough, the rail bosses are insisting that all new employees be paid only 80 percent of full union wages. New workers could receive full pay only after having put in 1,000 actual days of work. *That's more than three years.*

The companies also propose other pay-cutting measures, such as the elimination of all special pay allowances.

Work rules

The bosses are demanding major changes in union work rules. These changes would require road crews to perform work normally assigned to yard crews and vice versa. They would also eliminate jobs.

To top everything off, the railroads want to cut the number of paid holidays, as well as health and welfare benefits.

The union bureaucracy appears to have been stunned by these proposals after all their hooting and hollering about "labor-management cooperation."

In his initial response, UTU President Al Chesser called management's proposals "beyond the understanding of the thousands of loyal railroad employees."

He expressed "surprise" at the demands and said, according to *UTU News*, "that he could not believe the carriers were sincere."

Chesser said he would have to "wait" until after his initial bargaining conference with the carriers on July 7 "to accurately appraise the carriers' sincerity in the position they have taken."

Sincere & serious

The railroads are "sincere" and deadly serious. They are cocky and confident of their ability to deliver major blows against the wages, jobs, and working conditions of UTU members.

Chesser found that out during his July 7 meeting with them.

The bosses ignored his appeal to stop "this employer-employee war." Instead, they are gearing up for a war. The companies know that Chesser and his followers have no stomach for

battle. He's a pushover, not a fighter.

Soon after this meeting, Chesser called a news conference. He attacked the industry's stand as "the most regressive, antiquated, asinine demands ever served on a labor union in the history of labor relations."

He charged rail management with being "inept." And in an effort to scare the railroads, he even announced that the UTU brass is asking Congress to consider nationalizing the railroads.

Congress won't. And it certainly won't put the railroads under the democratic control of rail workers—the only real solution to the problems facing UTU members and other rail employees.

At the news conference, Chesser expressed his fear that a nationwide rail strike might happen next year. Peaceful labor relations would be "torn up" if the carriers persist in their demands, he said.

But Chesser has already indicated a willingness to reduce crew sizes through local negotiations, rather than as part of a national agreement. Charles Hopkins, the railroads' chief negotiator, responded positively to Chesser's suggestion, saying that the companies might agree to some national "guidelines" followed by local pacts.

According to the July 11 *Wall Street Journal*, Chesser also said that the union tops would be willing to discuss proposals to change the present pay system, while insisting that "we aren't going to take any pay cut."

Management isn't worried about Chesser's empty threats. They know that the UTU bureaucrats are incapable of mobilizing the union ranks for the coming showdown.

But the one ingredient in this battle that the railroads *are worried about* is the union membership.

The bosses, along with the UTU bureaucrats, hope that union members will knuckle under. They want to head off any attempts by the rail workers themselves to forge a powerful movement that could fight and win.

According to the June 27 issue of *Railway Age*, a management magazine, "The hope is that both sides, management and labor, can keep the drums muffled—with blaring trumpets nowhere to be heard."

I wouldn't put money on that. It's a safe bet that the union members will be heard.

Reprinted from July 29, Militant.