

A Vice President Speaks

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Why Bargain as a Coalition?

On December 9th, the BMWED served its bargaining demands on the major freight railroads that are being represented by the National Carriers' Conference Committee (NCCC). The BMWED will again be participating with other unions as part of the Rail Labor Bargaining Coalition (RLBC). The five other unions that are part of the coalition are; Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen, International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Blacksmiths, Iron Ship Builders, Forgers and Helpers, National Conference of Firemen and Oilers, Sheet Metal Workers' National Association.

The RLBC was created prior to the last round of bargaining and despite an anti-labor administration occupying the White House and an unfriendly Congress, the RLBC proved to be a success. After a drawn out and arduous process that finally led to a Bush appointed Presidential Emergency Board, the RLBC succeeded in obtaining a contract that the membership ratified by an overwhelming margin.

Obviously, there are a number of reasons why it's smart for rail unions to bargain as a unit. The most obvious of course is strength in numbers. As my grandfather used to say, "two heads are better than one even if one is cabbage." Sharing knowledge and resources can only benefit the process and forge a united front between labor organizations and allow the membership to feel that they are sharing in the same process regardless of craft. It also negates the railroad's ability to negatively target one specific craft and forces them to bargain collectively. As a general rule, the major railroads have learned to bargain as a unit within the NCCC, and while I'm not big on emulating the railroads, doesn't it make sense that we illustrate the same unity from the labor side?

While most issues are the same for all rail crafts, some will argue that they have craft specific issues that can't be addressed as a part of the coalition. While many times the parties do agree to revert to local handling over craft specific issues or local rules, nothing precludes resolving these issues as a part of this process. As one can see by Attachment "D" of the RLBC Section 6 Notice, craft specific issues are included within the demands and will be an integral part of the process.

I believe bargaining together with our brothers in other rail crafts is the best method. Most successful ventures involve coalitions. Working together with allies is a tried and true method to achieve success.

I expect this round of bargaining to be as tough as ever, but I believe that with the support and patience of our membership, in the end we will be proud of the results. Bargaining together worked before and it will work again.