

Union Update for Rail Crew Hauling Drivers

January 15, 2019

PTI Federal Lawsuit: As of this writing we have not received a decision from the Judge on the 2016 PTI Wage suit. A number of members have asked us to contact the Judge and see if we can urge him to decide the case. Our attorneys advise that we simply need to wait this out. And yes, we hear your frustration with this process.

Negotiations Status: The Union is engaged in two distinct negotiations. Our UPSEU/USW Service Agreement discussions are ongoing with PTI. The USW has separate negotiations with Renzenberger/Hallcon. In both cases, most of the non-economic issues have been resolved. In PTI's case, we are awaiting a wage proposal from the company. In Renzenberger/Hallcon's case, we have received their initial wage offer and are conducting a membership survey regarding that proposal. As we contend with these two sets of negotiations, our Rail Crew Alliance Union's, the United Electrical Workers and S.M.A.R.T. are also at the negotiating table with Renzenberger/Hallcon. The UE has reached an agreement with Renzenberger/Hallcon for a portion of their membership and are now negotiating for the remaining members in the company. S.M.A.R.T is also in the wage proposal phase of negotiations for the locations they represent.

Bargaining Environment: These negotiations are being seriously impacted because we are trying to reach labor agreements at the same time that these two companies are bidding on location contracts with several of the major Railroads. All three companies we have rail crew hauling contracts with report that several of the railroads are demanding cost reductions from them in this round of bidding. This impacts negotiations in several ways. First, until the bids are awarded, neither the company nor the unions know which company will be operating in which locations. Secondly, because some of the railroads are deeply engaged in cost cutting measures, the compensation the rail crew hauling companies can get for increased wages depends on which railroad is being serviced. Add that to the unresolved federal court wage dispute with PTI, and you can begin to understand why negotiations are moving so frustratingly slow.

Pure Insanity: It should be obvious to any casual observer that this situation is pure insanity. For the Railroads to be demanding cost reductions from contractors in what is already a low-wage industry is bad enough. But to do this in an economy where they are just killing it profit-wise, simply highlights the need for more worker rights and power. It doesn't even make business sense. By depressing wages while all other sectors are increasing them guarantees experienced drivers will leave to greener pastures. And that's what's happening. Increasingly we see shortages of drivers and the increased use of outside taxis. This is expensive and will only get worse.

We will see what the rail crew hauling companies do. Their best long-term strategy is to hold fast to bids that provide decent wage improvements for their employees and a reasonable profit for themselves. If the three major firms in the industry do that, the Railroads demanding reductions will not prevail. But sure as a baby is going to wet its diaper, one or more of these bidders will low-ball their bid to capture someone else's locations, and then try to hire drivers at lower wages. This isn't new. It's what has been going on. Not a pretty picture. But that is the struggle we are engaged in.

What To Expect: These are difficult negotiations at every company. But slow progress has been made. The outlines of a new contract are shaping up at both PTI and Renzenberger/Hallcon. Once the union and company seriously engage in the final phase of wage discussions, things will move to conclusion.

We've been keeping you informed of what is going on at the bargaining tables and consulting with our membership as issues have been discussed and resolved. We will be using the survey process as wages are discussed. This is the most effective way to reach our far-flung members and get your responses quickly. Please respond to these survey's and make your voices heard. Each one provides a comment area and we read every single comment you send us. Our bargaining issues came directly from the contract survey's you filled out and unresolved issues that we encountered since the last negotiations. As we consider wage proposals, we will consult with you. This is how representation works. At some point we will have a complete tentative agreement to send out for membership ratification, or we may ask for a strike authorization vote. At this point, it's hard to tell what direction the bargaining will take.

Reach Out to Your Co-Workers- Talk to your co-workers about the bargaining and make sure they are on the email list for your contract. Drivers can get on the email list by sending their name, email, and company they work for to 1222@usw.org.

Solidarity is Key: As we've been saying from the beginning, the companies judge your willingness to insist on a fair contract by the number of members the union has at each location. All of us have the responsibility of sharing the cost and putting our shoulders to the wheel to maximize our power. If a co-worker is not a union member, never stop talking to them about how important it is to join and participate. Being unionized isn't a spectator sport. For those who say the union is weak and not worth the cost of membership, you might want to remind them that without a union the companies would have you working AT minimum wage, no vacation, no holidays, and no ability to challenge management decisions or discipline. That's a reality that should be clear to every driver. To receive a union membership application, ask your Steward or email Paulette Battisti at pbattisti@usw.org.

Wear Your Buttons and Pass Out Our Stickers: The railroads and your company also assess how solid you are by seeing how many drivers are wearing the green contract support buttons. The railroads look at how many of their workers are wearing the driver support stickers. Wear your green button every day and keep increasing the number of railroaders who put on the support stickers. Be an activist and contribute to the negotiations effort.

Labor Quote: "Trade unions have stood at the front lines of struggles for democratic change and social justice throughout history. In many countries, we are the organized voice of oppositions to governments operating at the behest of corporate power and vested interests."
Sharan Burrow

The Union is YOU