

## “Lions Led by Asses”

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*While labor historians have organized a letter signing campaign to the Biden administration asking them to grant some concession to rail workers, others have pointed out the continuing tepid response of labor leadership as the cause of this crisis. Is the Democratic Party in charge of the labor movement? It would seem so. One worthy contribution on this note is from Chris Townsend, who points out that it took years of counter-organizing by the rank-and-file leadership of Railroad Workers United to even get this far. Now the barren marriage of labor leadership and the Democratic Party (oh, how Mike Davis is missed) displays its ugly mutual abusiveness. Only outside of academia are the calls for nationalization to save the industry from the most certain future crisis being expressed.-editor*

For centuries there have been observers and commentators that periodically point out when our leaders are failures, sometimes disastrously so. That the “leaders” are not up to the task at hand. Early 4<sup>th</sup> century Greek general Chabrias concluded that, “an army of deer commanded by a lion is more to be feared than an army of lions commanded by a deer”. “An army of sheep led by a lion would defeat an army of lions led by a sheep” was attributed to early Arab military leaders. During the British-Russian Crimean War in the 1850’s a Russian soldier penned a letter home and observed that the British soldiers were “lions led by donkeys.” Marx and Engels echoed that sentiment regarding British leadership in the Crimean War, noting that, “The English army is an army of lions led by asses.”

Legendary U.S. labor leader John L. Lewis also invoked the phrase when he denounced the leadership of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1947, as the United Mine Workers Union once again quit the AFL. Lewis, disgusted with the refusal of the Federation leaders to vigorously sustain resistance to the Taft-Hartley Act – and in fact with some offering their tacit support and accommodation to the anti-union bill – blasted the assembled leadership of the AFL Convention sitting in session in San Francisco. “The Taft-Hartley statute is the first ugly, savage thrust of fascism in America. It came into being through an alliance between industrialists and the Republican majority in Congress, aided and abetted by those Democratic legislators who still believe in the institution of human slavery... And is it true that the leaders of our movement are to be the first ... to put their tails between their legs

and run like cravens before the Taft-Hartley bill? I am reminded of the biblical parable, “Lions led by asses.” Lewis wound up his remarks by confronting once more the timid and conservative labor leaders for their inaction and cowardice in the face of the Taft-Hartley threat. “Hadn’t you better fight a little now than fight more down the road, or would you rather run?”

Were Lewis alive today I am confident that he would share the rage of tens of thousands of railroad workers, abandoned in many cases by their union “leaders” and now subjected to the dangerous piddling and meddling of President Biden. For more than 2 years the rail workers have labored without a new contract; for many decades their hands have been tied by anti-worker laws and politicians of both parties as their situation deteriorated steadily; and now comes the showdown today where 125,000 rail workers are compelled to resist the 5 remaining gigantic rail monopolies right up to the brink of strike with demands as simple as desiring a *few days off per year*? All through the railroad “negotiations” process the workers have made it clear that their work scheduling situation is personally debilitating and impossible to sustain, dangerous to workers and the public, and created and imposed solely for the benefit of the profit-gorged railroad shareholders.

You can bet that Lewis would speak up at a moment like this, and he would throw his full weight behind the rail workers struggling against the giant monopoly companies. Lewis would have raged against the politicians in both parties angling to kill off the eventual unavoidable strike, and profit politically by selling out the workers. He would have denounced Congress in their ultimately inevitable vote to squelch the strike that is almost certain to come. His particular wrath would have come down on the supposed union “leaders” of some of the rail unions, those timid and frightened men now hiding out, passing the buck, and claiming that nothing more can be done, all hoping that it will be magically resolved so they can enjoy their Christmas holiday in their customary comfort.

Lewis most of all would have had no qualms about exposing and excoriating the two primary political charlatans in the current drama, President Biden and Secretary of Labor Walsh. Unwilling to confront the rail management for their criminal treatment of the workforce these two have instead chosen to seek compromise and mediation, all delayed as long as possible in the hope that the anger of the workforce would pass, and would dissipate. *God forbid they would see that a strike in rail today would be just, overdue, and even politically popular, with tens of millions people now subjected to the impossible work demands of ever-more dictatorial bosses.* These two have conducted themselves in a particularly contemptible manner throughout the process, ever careful to parse their words so as not to offend the rail bosses and their dangerous and outrageous treatment of the rail crews. In an especially shameful spectacle, on November 24<sup>th</sup> Biden pled to the media that “I can’t (get

involved in the rail situation) because they are in negotiations.” Any unionist who has had a politician play this game knows full that the translation here is that “I am not going to do anything because I don’t want to anger the bosses.”

The rail labor negotiations situation is not complicated. The problem is that there is not very much negotiating going on. The law governing the negotiations is designed to diffuse worker anger and virtually eliminate the strike weapon. Those who benefit from the horrendous conditions facing the rail workforce, and those who want to *play politics* for their own benefit on the backs of the workers constantly try to confuse and over-complicate the situation. It is simple; a national rail strike is decades overdue, and the workforce knows that. The railroad monopolies know that. The politicians know that, but instead of backing the workers most of them want to shout from the rooftops that some end-of-world scenario would result if the workers were actually allowed to exercise their fundamental human right to strike.

But a real fracas now looms again, as any rail worker knew was inevitable. Four of the rail unions have overcome the misleadership of too many of their own union officers and the political meddling of ignorant and fraudulent politicians to say “No!” to the current deal that does not fundamentally address the rail workers basic issues. How many times do the rail workers have to tell anyone who will listen that it is impossible to sustain a career anyplace, at any wage – let alone in the rail industry – when you cannot get a day off no matter the urgency? As the rail monopolies have now unilaterally structured it the workers in operations will almost all eventually *fire themselves* given the draconian and absurd attendance policy now strangling the workforce.

As is always the case there are thankfully a notable number of rail union leaders who have valiantly led their members into these negotiations with their eyes wide open and the courage to do what it takes to fix the problems facing the workforce. And, to ultimately take strike action if necessary. They have however been offset by a coterie of union “leaders” who have run in all directions yelling that “I’m not going to tell you how to vote on this contract” and other drivel. The refusal of many trade union leaders to show leadership – what it was that they were elected to do in the first place – in this fashion at this very moment is either the result of ignorance, cowardice, treachery, or as many in the ranks suspect all three.

Countless second tier and local rail union leaders and members have waged a valiant against-all-odds campaign to kill the miserable contract proposal whether some of the union “leaders” – or Joe Biden and his Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh – like it or not. These real union leaders have clearly taken sides and led their members into several key rejections of

the deal. The members of the Maintenance of Way union (BMW), Sheet Metal and Rail union (SMART-TD), Signalmen (BRS), and Boilermakers union (IBB), have all rejected the contract. And even in the union ratification votes that ended up supporting the agreement, the margins of approval have been slim. In some, the democratic mechanics of the actual contract votes have been slippery, maneuvered by the union bigs to get the desired ratification. This is nothing new unfortunately in some of the rail brotherhoods, a fact that in its own way has contributed over the decades to the current dire situation.

Leading the movement for resistance to this deal and for authentic and aggressive union action against the rail barons is Railroad Workers United (RWU). For more than 15 years this rank-and-file network that crosses all crafts and unions has persistently told the truth about the situation facing the rail workforce and worked to build unity and real union power. These member-volunteers can be credited in the current battle with mobilizing far and wide to stop the ramrod of the current deal by the companies, union “leaders”, media, and politicians alike. If you want to know what *is really going on* check in with RWU at; <https://www.railroadworkersunited.org/> Sign up for RWU’s bulletins to get the facts about what is going down. Get your updates at this critical moment from the rail workers in RWU.

The next few weeks will be crucial, as the entire media, politicians from both parties, and the rail companies will be pulling out all stops to kill a strike, to demonize it, and to do everything to drum up a political backlash against the rail workforce. December 9<sup>th</sup> looms as the next trigger date for a possible rail strike so stay tuned and prepare to support the members in this fight. The current situation in rail describes perfectly the adage “Lions led by asses.” Lend all support to the lions of those in the rail union leaderships willing to fight, the RWU, and to hell with the asses.

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