



Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen

A Division of the Rail Conference of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters

High-Tech Divide and Conquer

By Dennis R. Pierce, National President

In my last President's Message, I closed by saying the following:

“ . . . our success in all of our goals is directly tied to our solidarity. I will say it again; we must put aside any of the issues that may have divided us in the political cycle and, instead, focus on the workplace issues that we have in common. We must not allow the Rail Carriers to divide us with their efforts to blame our Unions when they mistreat their employees. We must remember that anyone who attacks your Union is attacking you and your livelihood. . . .”

In the weeks that have passed since I wrote that message, it has become more evident that we must recommit ourselves to solidarity with everyone who will work with us to protect the pay, benefits and jobs of not only BLET members, but all Union rail workers. That includes working with elected and appointed government officials at both the State and Federal level who will assist us in our efforts and 2021 certainly presents us with new opportunities at all levels. It also includes supporting coalitions of Labor Unions that have all committed to a common cause. While that may seem like a simple thing, it is easier said than done.

For well over a century, Brotherhood law has cautioned our membership to beware of “insidious approaches of any and all enemies of the organization and the machinations of capital and its agents.” While the wording is from a bygone era, the warning is more important now than ever. It is obviously nothing new for rail carriers to attempt to “divide and conquer” their Union-represented employees. Over many decades, they have sown division among their individual employees, and between their employees' Labor Unions. And technology has now given them a new tool in that effort.

The term “gaslighting” is not new; by definition, it is a “form of psychological manipulation in which a person or a group covertly sows seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or group.” What is more and more prevalent in our world is the use of technology to accomplish gaslighting, by “Using denial, misdirection, contradiction and misinformation, gaslighting involves attempts to destabilize the victim and delegitimize the victim's beliefs.”

This may sound like complicated psychological language, but in actuality these are simple terms. Social media has become the perfect tool for rail carriers to use in an effort to mislead

employees, and in doing so, drive wedges between you and your Union. It has become commonplace for railroad management to tell local representatives that the General Chairmen of their bargaining unit agreed to something when they did not. Even more often, railroad management has tried to convince its employees that one Union was intent on hurting another Union. Then those same false Carrier accusations show up on social media, where those who read it have no readily available way of knowing what is true and what is not.

This much is true: we must not allow rail carriers to turn BLET members against one another, nor one Union against another. There is no doubt that rail carriers are abusing their employees at every turn, and then sowing seeds of blame targeting the Union for not fixing the problems fast enough. There is also no doubt that Rail Union members are angry at the fact that the Railway Labor Act requires that the vast majority of the related disputes must be arbitrated. Years of an underfunded National Mediation Board then compounds the delay in obtaining resolution, further increasing the anger on the property.

Enter the same rail carriers that created that situation, now throwing out misinformation about your Union and its efforts to stop their abuse by their plants on social media websites and pages. These seeds of misinformation, cast into the soil that the carriers have cultivated, are bound to grow if left unchecked.

And when members ask, why now? Remember that as part of its coalition of Unions in the last round of national contract negotiations, BLET bargained jointly with SMART-TD. This was the first time the operating unions bargained together nationally since 1964. We are bargaining together again in the current round, and we are working together on both the State and Federal level to pursue legislative, regulatory and legal solutions to our mutual issues. You need go no further than our recent victory in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals reversing former FRA Administrator Ron Batory's effort to use negative preemption to vacate state laws requiring two persons on certain trains to see the value in our joint efforts.

BLET and SMART-TD are also negotiating in this round as part of the Coordinated Bargaining Coalition, the largest rail labor coalition assembled for national rail bargaining in recent history. Our Coalition is exactly what I described earlier, "Labor Unions that have all committed to a common cause."

These things combined are why the rail carriers will do everything in their power to try and undermine our solidarity. And this is why the cautionary language in our Union's Bylaws is more important now than ever.

Do not fall for the gaslighting. Do not assume that the anti-Union propaganda that you see on social media is true, especially when it is clearly designed to pit Union Brother against Union Brother, or one Union against another. Do your own fact checking, but most importantly, be involved in your Union. As I said in my opening quote, "anyone who attacks your Union is attacking you and your livelihood." Never forget that.