

What The UTU

Failed To Mention About Belt-Pack

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On June 10, it was my privilege to have a sixty minute telephone conversation with International BLE President, Don Hahs. In the first half-hour we discussed several current events in general, and in the second half we discussed Belt-Pack (RCL) in particular.

Most noteworthy in the first half was the possibility of the UTU merging with the Teamsters in concert with the BLE. Although top UTU management is currently opposed to this idea, faced with growing dis-content among its members, hence defection by its members to the new Teamster-BLE union, may force top UTU management to reconsider their position on merging. If all of us became Teamsters, there would be no union minority left behind to suffer the political reprisals and management retaliations of a vengeful railroad, while gaining tremendous bargaining strength for all in the balance. Therefore, we discussed the possibility of organizing an informal petition among all BLE locals across the United States for the purpose of democratically measuring UTU membership transfer interest to the new union. For what it's worth, a majority of UTU members, with whom I've spoken, would sign such a petition instantly.

Most noteworthy during the second half-hour was the sharing of the very recent conversation between President Hahs and Canadian National (CN) Executive Vice President-Operations, E. Hunter Harrison, voted "Railroad Man of the Year" for 2001. Accordingly, CN, after eight years of RCL experience, will continue retiring units where they have been proven to be cost and/or time ineffective. If genuine, on the part of Mr. Harrison, (remember the IF) this is very remarkable because CANAC, one of the manufacturers of RCL, is a CN subsidiary.

As reported, while CN is intelligently withdrawing RCL operations, U.S. railroads are in a reckless hurry to implement its use along with top UTU management as its coconspirators. "Economy at any cost" is forcing railroads to struggle with almost comical ideas in a vain attempt to make RCL work. For example, golf carts for switchmen; hooking of one's left arm over the railcar's top ladder rung so the Belt-Pack can be operated with both hands; forcing conventional switch engine crews to strap-on the BeltPacks, while the RCL crew has lunch; bastardization of the GCOR (rules); insane amounts of extra engines; "shot-gunned" outbound trains; inbound mainline crews switching out their own trains; turning

off the RCL feature mid-shift and going back to conventional mode - leaving just one man on the ground (this, in order to recoup productivity loss), and believe it or not - a third switchman in place of the engineer, also to compensate for productivity loss. Most ironic of all and not comical, by any means, is the turning away of certain less profitable industrial zone business, which is found to be RCL inconvenient or awkward as revealed by CN and CP railroad people in Vancouver, B.C. Further, as President Hahs has stated, "The railroads are in such a hurry to implement RCL that safety is being compromised." Even the many superintendents, terminal managers and trainmasters have shared, very privately, with their union local reps. across the country, the prayer: "I hope RCL never comes to my terminal(s)."

By now, you should all be very familiar with the fact that at least three RCL switch engines are required to equal the productivity of two conventional switch engines (CSE). Three RCL engines x two switchmen = six switchmen. Two CSE's x (one engineer + two switchmen) = two engineers + four switchmen or six employees, also. The old saying, "six and one-half dozen the other", fits perfectly here. Given this very simple arithmetic, it is true there should be no loss in employee numbers, particularly in busier terminals, where employees are kept 100% on-duty utilized. In other words, the loss of switch-engine engineers will be equaled by the addition of switchmen instead. Therefore, this is obviously an "employee grab" by the UTU to retain as many of its present UTU members as possible in a selfish attempt to discourage as many "ground-hogs" as possible from joining the BLE. If you are a "ground-hog" who transfers between ground and locomotive cab as your seniority allows, and you are content in handling a Belt-Pack strapped to your belly for the rest of your career - fine, stay in the UTU. On the other hand, if you are a UTU-E switch-engine engineer with seniority enough to presently keep you in the cab year round, your union is "selling-out" your job position, which places your UTU membership in a huge conflict of interest with top UTU management. Given the proud endorsement of RCL by top UTU management, why any UTU engineer would continue to pay dues to support these top UTU managers, absolutely and pro-foundly, defies logic. To put this in perspective, an engineer paying dues to the UTU is analogous to an Afro-American paying dues to the Klu-Klux-Klan or a Jew paying dues to the Nazis.

Congratulations are in order for the UTU coming very close in settling its new contract. AS part of this contract, it is my understanding switchmen will receive an extra \$15 per shift for RCL operation. Is this compensation enough, however, to compensate for the extra body pain, stress and responsibility imposed by RCL. In networking with RCL crews in Mandan, N.D. for stress examples, I had no idea grave yard shift, in winter, requires three pairs of gloves and/or mittens to withstand the bitter cold. This environment is so dark and cold, Belt-Pack controls can neither be seen or felt. Another form of RCL stress is the syndrome of "information overload." As a switchman's attention is torn in many directions, the switchman, after a time, starts losing track of how fast the equipment is rolling with RCL, which has obvious implications for over-speed couplings of Haz-mat shipments. In

Vancouver, B.C., inspite eight years of experience, some ofthe switchmen there have yet to develop the needed co-ordination and timing to

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operate RCL even at 2/3 of CSE productivity and as a result, forever work on the edge of railroad discipline, account lack of productivity. These are just three examples of complications arising from RCL use. There will be hundreds, if not thousands, of other examples that when taken together with the bastardization of the GCOR, begs the question, is \$15 extra, enough?

Speaking of sharing, trainmen constantly show me the newspaper headlines of how the UTU proudly endorses RCL. In related headlines, I am shown how the UTU has chosen to defend the use of RCL over the integrity of its own dues-paying members by saying RCL mishaps are caused purely by trainmen error. These headlines, whether frue or not,

are the political words of top UTU management, who are overly friendly with top railroad management. These same headlines mis-represent the truth in what the vast majority of UTU members actually think, relative to RCL. rt is high-time that UTU members demand that this propaganda cease and desist.

The rhetoric surrounding RCL seems to be boiling down more and more to the noble and politically correct issue of safety. Now that we have organized the communications to collect RCL mishaps as they add up more and more, we will be able to determine if the RCL mishaps are technology or human caused. But, even if human caused, in treating the symptom vs. the disease itself, could it be there aren't enough human eyes, ears and brains in combination with RCL technology to enable it to safely work? After all, aren't eyes, ears and brains thee supreme fonn of technology - God and/or nature given? If there had been a third set of eyes, ears and brains in the form of an engineer, the RCL accidents to date would most assuredly not have occurred.

In conclusion, show us the improved safety; show us the improved efficiency; show us the improved profitability. After all, some of us train and engine service employees are railroad stock holders, also, yet all of us are indeed members of this railroad community, who will ultimately be relied upon to make it make sense. Thank You.

P.S. If you want to join the BLE, be mindful that your life and health insurances are open-market instruments and remain with you even if you change unions, according to BLEPres. Hahs. Your UTU job insurance, however, is obviously not transferable to the BLE

