

# What The BLE Failed To

## Mention About Belt-Pack

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To quote our very able and honorable CA Legislative Board Chairman, Timothy L. Smith: "The quality of our BLE Union is the unionship that we are, and together we can accomplish anything." What Tim is talking about is networking. To network only amongst ourselves, however, is only the half of it. The other half is networking with the carriers to produce win-win opportunities for us and them. Gone are the days when we could just ask for and receive improvements for labor. In today's economy, we need to justify our labor demands with economic case study. To help put this in perspective, under a "Bush-banana-Republican-Regime" where railway labor contracts mean little; where railway labor traditions mean nothing, and our ability to wage a railway strike is no longer an option, our only option left is networking. It is well documented historical fact that the key to survival was indeed networking in extremely hostile situations such as those found in the World War II concentration camps of central Europe or the "Hanoi Kllton" P.O.W. camps of the Vietnam War- At the risk of sounding absurd, let me point out that our railway labor situation is in certain ways comparable to these concentration camps where contract, tradition and striking was also useless, and again the only option left to those captive souls was networking. I will devote the balance of this article to what we, the BLE organizatm failed to mention (network) about Belt-Pack.

As might be expected, some of my co-workers call me the Thomas Paine of Belt-Pack, and ask how and when I got so involved with this issue. It's hard to pin-point in time, but Belt-Pack has been on my "radar screen" for a good several years. I have been following it — not in the pages of our BLE publications as I should have been able to — but rather within the pages of Railway Age, instead. As Belt-Pack drifted closer and closer to "radar center", I developed a mere "ig-four", square-root, cornerstone questions our BLE Union should have been able to answer through our 10 year Belt-Pack experience in Canada: 1) How much ext4 if any, do its operators earn for the extra responsibility and bodily pain? 2) Were there any adversely affected employees and, if so, were they compensated? 3) In what ways were the GCOR (rules) and accident reports bastardized? 4) Most importantly of all and cube-root to its core, what is the productivity ratio between Belt-Pack and conventional?

To get these "big-four" questions answered, I networked with my able and honorable Div. 839 local Chairman, Mark Tonn, who in turn networked with the BLE at various levels. Month after union meeting month, Mark would share the useless and irrelevant BLE answers to questions not even asked. I reminded ourselves at the union meetings that with the Canadians, we shared the same language, interchanged cars, track-gauge, operating rules, telephone system(s) and union(s), etc. — so, what's the problem? After the third

month or third strike, if you will, it was all too obvious that I would need to network with our Canadian brothers, myself, to get the "big-four" questions answered.

With every contact, I was gladly received by our able brothers on the Canadian National, Canadian Pacific and Algoma Central. It was as if I was the "S.S. California" who finally made contact with "H.M.S. Titanic". For the fun of it, I asked a question: Was I the first U.S. locomotive engineer to network this? Their answer: What took you so long?

At this point, it is much more important for us to understand the differences we have with the Canadians than it is to understand our similarities. For one, adversely affected Canadian switch-engine engineers, based on seniority, are offered early retirement packages. We, in the U.S., are not. When US. rail carriers are hellbent on using 10 year old Canadian Labor Decision(s) to argue for and justifiably Belt-Pack, they at the same time conveniently ignore Canadian early retirement provisions for us. This inconsistency reminds me of the old saying, "The one shoe fits, but the other doesn't." Secondly, when the Canadian carriers argued for Belt-Pack 10 years ago, they made the arguably legitimate claim that the switchman was merely giving speed and stop commands to the Belt-Pack equipment, as the same switchman might give speed and stop commands to an engineer. The Canadian carriers also argued that the switchmen would not perform the engineer's job relative to the use of headlights, bell, whistle, sanders or train brakes. As you know, present day Belt-Pack enables switchmen to perform all engineer functions, as if being engineers, thereby making the 10 year old Canadian decision(s) in breach, irrelevant and contrary to its spirit and intent. The old saying, "Give 'em an inch and they'll take a mile", fits perfectly here. Thirdly, Canadian engineers have true "flowback" to trainmen positions. In the U.S., only the old Santa Fe portion of the BNSF is blessed with true "flow-back". The old BN, CSX, NS and UP don't share this blessing.

At this juncture, let's not repeat Belt-Pack's lack of productivity or safety issues as have been covered in our articles one, two and three. Besides which, many of you have already developed your own Belt-Pack war stories. One new productivity question, however, is why California receiving such a dis-proportionate over-share of Belt-Pack units? It is assumed that if it can be made to half-way work in contrarian California, sometimes known as the "left-coast", it can be spread like margarine around the rest of the country. In other words, the carriers are betting railroad men outside California will have more acceptance toward Belt-Pack. This remains to be seen.

Another new productivity question is, why are railroads willing to absorb ("eat") the lower productivity of Belt-Pack together with lower customer service to the point of screwing up terminal and even mainline operations? This is an extremely good question.

Be mindful that Belt-Pack is merely a stepping stone toward a much grander prize. That grander prize is nicknamed "mainline Star-Wars" and is being developed by General Electric. In case you haven't figured it out yet, the carriers want to exterminate (abolish) mainline engineer or conductor jobs. Unlike Belt-Pack, which will not reduce the number of yard employees overall, "Star-Wars" on the other hand, will eliminate the number of mainline employees by 50%. Be mindful our carriers don't have money enough to install "Star-Wars". For financing, the carriers will need government assistance. It is most ironic that we, as tax paying locomotive engineers, will help finance our own extinction that of

our CONDUCTOR BROTHERS. But wait a second, if "Star-Wars" is such a good investment, then why can't our carriers finance it on their own, in-house, based on its stand-alone economics? We, as tax paying engineers, need to network with our congressmen and senators by demanding that "StarWars" be financed with private capital funds only, particularly in view of the fact that it's such a "good investment".

Assuming history repeats itself (a pretty good assumption), let us for the fun of it offer simple speculation how "Star-Wars" will unfold. First, after a good many years of hightech development, it will already be obsolete by its first day of use. After most of its bugs are worked out, any realized labor savings after debt service will be passed on to the shippers, anyway, in the form of deflationary rate war among the deregulated railroads, thereby keeping the "bottom line" (net profit) the same. After several years, however, the many "maintenance mouths" of "Star-Wars" will need to be fed, the cost of which may or may not be passable to the shippers. Remember, when a carrier's outgo exceeds its income — its upkeep will be its downfall. Also remember, that with engineerless trains together with Murphy's Law, the one on-board train monitoring employee will probably be asleep at the time he's needed most — when "Star-Wars" goes bonkers. Imagine, if you will, the hazards of "Star-Wars" driven automobiles.

In conclusion, our locomotive engineer brotherhood failed to mention (network) the incredible implications of Belt-Pack. Even if it had, some might question the point or the purpose. In my humble opinion, however, to organize a community of questioning thought leads to a community of informed resistance and in turn leads to a community of intelligent, peaceful rejection, which will serve to spare our carriers from needless economic and financial waste. To offer perspective, there was never a military power strong enough to overthrow communism. Communism failed under its own misbegotten weight of peaceful rejection. Meanwhile, the UTU on the other hand, exposed us to the indecent exposure of their pandering a physically molesting and abusive technology called Belt-Pack as if we were gullible, preyed upon innocent which makes top UTU management strange bedfellows of the carriers, indeed! Thank you.