

## **UTU, BLET join to fight crew reduction**

1/30/2006

(from Railway Age magazine)

In a rare display of solidarity, the United Transportation Union and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen—two unions that have spent considerable time and resources conducting a war of words and turf—have decided to put aside their differences and join forces to combat what they say is a concerted effort by the railroads to reduce crew size in the current round of collective bargaining, according to this report published by railwayage.com.

At issue is the railroads' interest in operating freight trains with one-person crews, which they say will be possible with Positive Train Control, a technology now under evaluation independently at several carriers and also the subject of an industry-wide pilot project (the North American Joint PTC Program). The railroads want to place one-person train operations onto the collective bargaining table. The unions want the subject off the table, claiming railroad worker safety and public safety is at risk.

It is not clear just how many trains would be reduced to one-person operation, or how many of the Class I roster of 66,698 operating (Train & Engine Service) employees (according to the most recent STB figures) might be affected. At a joint UTU/BLET news conference this afternoon, responding to a question from Railway Age, UTU President Paul C. Thompson and BLET President Don M. Hahs said that they had received various and conflicting estimates from the railroads. One estimate, they said, indicated that up to 20% of operating employees would be affected, mainly through attrition. Another indicated that up to two-thirds of trains could eventually be operated by one person.

In a joint letter to their collective membership released prior to the news conference, Thompson and Hahs accused the Class I's of pursuing a negotiating strategy of "using past differences between [our unions] as a wedge to reduce crew size, thereby putting the lives of all rail workers and the public in danger and also seriously threatening the financial security of the Railroad Retirement system."

"This is no longer about our unions, it's about our members," Thompson said at the news conference. The railroads are currently operating trains with two-person crews. "If that's not an efficient crew, I don't know what is," he said. "Crew-size reduction has gone far enough," he added, recalling the days when trains ran with four- and five-person crews.

Thompson, who says he has participated in national negotiating sessions for more than 20 years, called the current round of collective bargaining "the most deplorable I have ever seen." He said, and Hahs concurred, that the railroads have been privately and separately promising the UTU and the BLET that each would become the surviving union if, among other things, each would testify against the other during Presidential Emergency Board hearings. Thompson added that Bob Allen, lead negotiator for the National Carriers Conference Committee, "has been playing us like a banjo."

Thompson said that, although all five of the U.S.-based Class I's (UP, BNSF, NS, CSX, KCS) have been part of the negotiations, BNSF has been most aggressive in

trying to play one union against the other. Railroads "have stonewalled us," and "have not resolved a single issue," he said. "They want an impasse, and a PEB" that might give them concessions they could not win in bargaining. Hahs added that, although he "doesn't blame the carriers for being hard-nosed during negotiations-that's just the way it is," the railroads, by their actions, have undermined any sense of trust that may have existed.

"The carriers' attempt to reduce crew size has nothing to do with new technology," Thompson and Hahs told their members. "Indeed, the carriers have told the National Transportation Safety Board that implementation of PTC is many years away. Moreover, the Federal Railroad Administration has not conducted a study into the safety and reliability of reduced crew size, nor its impact on an already highly fatigued workforce operating trains through congested areas carrying highly toxic hazmat during this era of heightened terrorist threats to the security of our nation's railroads."

During the press conference, Thompson and Hahs provided several examples of why a one-person crew would be unsafe and impractical:

-- If a train breaks down and blocks a crossing, one person cannot quickly cut the train in two to unblock the crossing if an emergency response vehicle (an ambulance or fire truck) needs to get through. This is a serious threat to public safety.

-- If an air hose breaks far back in the train, one person cannot not be expected to handle the situation in a timely fashion, and without compromising their own safety.

-- How does one person deal with a grade crossing collision?

-- The railroads have said that relief personnel would be available in the event of a breakdown or other incident, but there are many places where it would be extremely difficult to get extra people out to a stranded train.

-- Basic human needs: How does one person take a restroom break and run the train at the same time?

The railroads will have to "totally revamp" their operating practices for one-person crews, said Hahs. That means smaller crew districts and shorter in-service hours. Railroads cannot expect one person to be working twelve-hour shifts "day in and day out in an unscheduled environment," with only five and six hours of rest in between shifts. (The FRA mandates a minimum of eight hours of rest in between shifts, but the unions maintain that employees rarely get a full eight hours of rest, taking transit time, family time, and other factors into account.) As for PTC, Thompson noted that the technology is "experimental," and "proprietary" from supplier to supplier, and said that suppliers have made statements to the effect that PTC is intended as a safety overlay system, not a means to reduce crew size. He said that labor "needs to be a part of the development of PTC," and that operating employees "would embrace PTC if it does what the railroads say it does" with regard to improving safety of train operations. Both union leaders agreed that neither UTU nor BLET will sign any documents pledging to support PTC.

In what Thompson and Hahs are characterizing as "a demonstration of good faith," the UTU has withdrawn its application for a single-craft representation election at the Union Pacific, while the BLET has agreed to refrain from trying to organize UTU-represented properties. At this time, neither union is in a position to negotiate jointly, but are pursuing a joint strategy to deal with the one-person-crew issue.

"Our two organizations have had their differences, but when it comes to protecting our members' job security and safety, we must stand together against the hostile attacks of the carriers' expressed intent on eliminating jobs," said Thompson and Hahs. The two unions say their joint effort has the support of the Teamsters, AFL-CIO, and other railroad unions. One part of their strategy will be lobbying a Congress that, in an election year, may be reluctant to deal with a railroad work stoppage and a Presidential Emergency Board. Both unions, they said, have received "letters of great concern" from Congressmen who feel a PEB at this point in time would be "premature."

(The preceding report was published by railwayage.com on Tuesday, Jan. 31, 2006.)