



Railroad Workers United

Unity—Solidarity—Democracy: The Rank and File in Action!

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Escalation of Rail Fatalities; It's Time for *Real* Safety

Sounding the alarm as early as March, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) urged all rail carriers, rail labor organizations, and rail workers to take action to reverse an alarming trend – rail fatalities escalating out of control. The FRA took note of the fact that the year 2008 had already witnessed a reversal of a downward trend with a high of 19 fatalities, and that by March of this year, seven employees had been killed. Despite “asking all rail employees for their help in reversing this trend,” before May was over the number of dead had nearly doubled, to 12 killed.

The FRA issued some sound advice to rail workers: Maintain your situational awareness at all times; have thorough and complete job briefings and always ensure that all are aware of the work to be performed; make safety your first priority, and comply with all operating rules and federal regulations. And remember your rights to utilize “the railroad’s empowerment policies and good faith challenges that are afforded to you by regulation.” Hinting that the root of the problem might lie at the doorstep of the carrier, the FRA notes that, “If a culture exists whereby workers feel they are put in situations where they are making poor decisions for fear of losing their jobs, we must work together to change this culture.”

Unfortunately, the FRA stops short and simply advises us that, “As individuals, we have a responsibility to maintain a safe work environment...” Once again, the FRA has focused solely on individual worker behavior and is letting the carriers off the hook. The FRA should consider another option – outlaw behavior based safety programs and in their place, mandate that the carriers and the unions meet as equals to build real safety programs which empower the workforce. They should develop programs that tackle the root cause of accidents, injuries and fatalities. These programs must focus on hazard elimination rather than blaming workers.

Even a quick glance at some of the recent fatalities should show even the casual observer that the drastic increase in fatalities can be linked to carrier actions. The recent economic downturn has resulted in massive job cuts. In many cases, the carrier has eliminated jobs out of proportion to the downturn in traffic levels, resulting in trimmed extra boards and pools, chronic crew fatigue, doubling up on work tasks, short staffing, etc. In this environment, it is easy to see how safety can take a nose dive. And since management’s behavior based safety programs do not speak to these vital issues (adequate staffing, proper rest and time off, and other elimination of hazards), when fatality numbers go through the roof, they have no way to explain this disturbing trend – except to blame the worker even more.

Considering that we are in the midst of a recession that has seen dramatic drops in freight traffic and deep cuts in rail employment, one would expect a concomitant decline in employee fatalities. Because the opposite is in fact the case, it is an indictment of all these carefully honed behavior based safety programs. Despite their rhetoric about “Safety First”, it is obvious that in the face of this deteriorating situation that maintaining “profits first” is the number one goal of the company.

Unfortunately, the carriers and the FRA are not the only ones who are focusing strictly on behavior-based safety programs instead of hazard elimination. Instead of helping us lobby the FRA for development of effective safety programs, our union leaders have too often become willing participants in the creation of “pilot” behavior-based safety programs. When rank-and-file members or locals ask for help in combating problems with local BBS programs, they defer their responsibilities to others. All too often it seems they are more connected to the carriers’ desires than they are to their rank-and-file members’ needs. Unfortunately, they often claim to be too busy to take the time to truly educate THEMSELVES about behavior-based safety programs.

It is time for us to draw a line in the sand. It is we who do the work. It is we who move the nation’s freight and passengers. It is we who work short staffed, who work without proper rest and time off, who are compelled to work without proper training and preparation. And it is we who die as a result of the carriers’ negligence in providing a safe workplace. We are fed up with the carriers’ pseudo-safety programs that point the finger at us for all that is wrong. Enough of these meaningless slogans, such as that of one major carrier, which in an Orwellian style campaign bombards its employees with a mantra to recite: “I will not get hurt. I will not hurt others. I will not allow others to hurt themselves.” From our point of view, there is a better way of looking at safety in the workplace: “I will not let the company hurt me. I will not let the company hurt others. I will not allow others to be hurt by the company!”

Yes, it is high time for REAL safety!