

Our Members Speak Out

Safe Sustainable Work Schedules are the Starting Point for Safe Train Operation

By Karl "Fritz" Edler

It seems like the only time the public or politicians think about rail safety is after a big crash. This time it's the deadly Amtrak train #188 crash on the Northeast Corridor (NEC). Anybody who has been part of a railroad operating crew knows we think about it all the time. That's why some of us are so angry that all the attention has been on cameras and cell phones and new technology when there was another big safety hazard that day that has yet to be given the attention it deserves; i.e., new unsafe and unsustainable work schedules.

Amtrak engineers and conductors tried to stop Amtrak from imposing these new work schedules. Sadly we failed. These more dangerous schedules are still in effect, so getting rid of them has to be at the top of the to-do list for all of us and for our union leaders.

Here's the Short Version of What Happened

- Amtrak imposed new "optimized" work schedules on the Northeast Corridor on March 23, 2015 over the strong objections of operating crew representatives. These schedules completely removed all traditional human factor considerations and prioritized only cost.
- We told them the new schedules made the railroad less safe, made a tough job unnecessarily tougher and increased the risk of a major tragedy. They did it anyway, telling us there was nothing we could do to stop them.
- The tragic crash of Amtrak #188 took place just seven weeks later. The crew was operating under the more risky schedules. All NEC crews are still forced to work these unsafe work schedules.
- Amtrak management says there is no connection between these two facts. They want the focus on ATC, PTC and new cameras, not their new hazardous work schedules. But the undeniable fact is that whoever ran Amtrak 188 that night had a harder more difficult job than they should have because of the changed schedules.

Management Made the Railroad Less Safe

Safe schedules are no mystery. Railroad science has shown that operating crews need adequate time between runs, especially on runs like the congested high-speed Northeast Corridor. We also know that the human body works better with as regular a time as possible to wake up and to go to sleep, with a regular work schedule in between these two.

Before March 23, 2015 we had sustainable layovers and more consistent starting times. Amtrak went the other way. Management relied upon a computer program that was never used on a railroad before and ignored the warnings of operating crew representatives who have run these trains every day for years. Safety was specifically ruled out as a consideration in the program. Cost, not safety or even sustainability, informed management's decision as to which run sheet to use.

Since March 23rd the middle, sustainable layover times were decimated. Way too many couplets are too short to provide either rest or dependable turns. The number of unnecessarily long jobs were quadrupled. The computer generated couplets dictated that the starting times on way too many assignments



The safety and security of both freight and passenger rail is best addressed by utilizing well rested train and engine crews who work reasonable hours on predictable schedules.

jump up to 6 and more hours every week from day to day. All unprecedented and all unnecessary based on timetables. You hear about schedules like that at non-union places like Walmart and McDonalds. Now we have them at Amtrak.

The Fight for Safe Schedules is Not Over

Management did not have to answer any of our safety concerns. Since work schedules are not part of our Collective Bargaining Agreements they had the last word. But we can only ignore the role of "optimization" in chronic fatigue at our peril. They forced us to work these unsafe schedules but they can't force us to be quiet about them.

Every time any representative of railroad operating crews meets with management or with political leaders or the media we must bring up the issue of these new unsafe work schedules. We owe it to our families and our passengers.

The BLET General Committee on Amtrak is in negotiations with Amtrak for a new contract. We know how the complexities of the Railway Labor Act can tie us up in legal knots, but this is a good time to ask management about schedule changes and call on them to defend their reckless actions. They told the NEC operating crews "fatigue is not a safety issue." Let's make them defend that statement in public.

Safe layovers and same time element starting times should be part of the BLET contract so Amtrak management can't ever force unsafe changes on us ever again.

For more details check out <http://tinyurl.com/p5c6nz5>

Fritz Edler retired as working Local Chair of BLET #482 in May, 2015. He was a leading participant in the ongoing fight against risky crew schedules on Amtrak. He served 20 years on the Local Committee of Division 482 and led numerous successful defense efforts. Previously active in the UTU and the BRC, he now lobbies and organizes for Safe Quality Nationwide Passenger Rail: Advocacy for rail workers in Washington D.C.

