

Opinion & Commentary

After Three Decades of Concessions, Rails Have Had Enough!

In the first commentary of this series (see [The Highball](#), Fall 2012), I stated the case that while we may have issues with our present working conditions and compensation, beware of what the future has in store for us, utilizing the Carriers' 2004 and 2009 Section 6 Notices as a guide. I pointed out how carrier proposals that may appear to be extreme and far-fetched in the present, ultimately end up becoming reality in the not-too-distant future. Since its inception, RWU has warned that the carriers have never been content with how much they've conquered so far. Please refer to our Campaign Against Single Employee Crews for more in-depth analysis on that particular issue.

This second commentary takes a closer, in-depth look at the concessions we've made over the last three decades, and the implications for us in the present. These concessions break down into two basic categories: 1) the steadily declining purchasing power of our wages vs. the steadily increasing cost of living; and 2) the intensification of our workloads due to the drastic reduction in crew consist. I plan here to address the issue of the crew consist, first as it relates to yard work, then the road. For the sake of this discussion, I'll deal with what once were considered to be basic norms in the industry. When I hired out in 1974, the typical yard crew consisted of the engineer, yard foreman, hind brakeman and head brakeman. A fireman, essentially an assistant engineer, was optional, depending on how many engineers were set back. For those of you welcomed into the industry with a brief training on how to operate the RCO box, this little trip down "memory lane" might be a little jarring. Just imagine how jarring it has been for those of us who have actually lived through this!

Three crew members on the ground was actually an equitable division of labor and made for quite the efficient and safe operation. One crew member made the cuts, standing or rolling, another would get the switches, while the other could fill in as needed, making joints, securing tracks, protecting shoves, posting tracks, etc. Unfortunately, the norm in our industry has degenerated to the point that more often than not, one switchperson is now performing the work of what three once did. Many of my co-workers complain of sore feet, ankles, knees, backs, shoulders, etc. This "cost" of doing business goes unmentioned in productivity or operating ratio statistics.

The phasing out of the fireman went into high gear with the 1985 National Agreement. The carriers had argued for years that as the steam locomotives went extinct, so should the fireman. They were now nothing more than "dead weight" and "featherbedders". Let's think about this one for a second. The average cockpit of a passenger plane requires a pilot and a co-pilot at minimum. If the pilot were to make some technical and/or procedural error

or were to become incapacitated, hundreds of lives could potentially be at stake. But if a locomotive engineer were to make some such error and wreck a train of hazardous material such as ammonia or liquified petroleum gas in a heavily populated metropolitan area, thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of lives may be affected. Tell the hog-head who is summoning all of his/her willpower to combat fatigue at 3:00 a.m. because s/he is working their fifth or sixth consecutive start, spinning on their legally mandated but insufficient "rest", that an assistant engineer would be nothing more than "dead weight" and a "featherbedder"!

On road crews, the conductor and hind brakeman rode the caboose. Their primary responsibilities were to visually inspect the train for potential problems that could cause or contribute to a derailment; and to protect their train from following movements. If the train had to stop due to a problem en route, if it was towards the rear of the train, they could deal with it. If the point of the problem was unknown, they could look for it from the rear while the head brakeman would walk back from the engine. With a full crew, pick-ups, set-outs, industry work, etc, were all executed efficiently and with an equitable division of labor.

With our modern-day road trains, all that labor once performed by three is done by one. Now when there is a problem en route and it is toward the rear of the train, the conductor is walking the length of the train, then back to the engine. As the carriers run ever longer trains in order to operate with fewer crews, the round trip stroll through the countryside can approach four miles and counting! And more often than not, this "hike" is on moon-rock sized ballast, on a steep sloping grade. Factor in a narrow bridge and/or wintery conditions, and a battle-tested road conductor could slam dunk most contestants on any of those endurance challenge reality TV shows. And with work rule changes, road crews are now switching out their trains upon arrival in the yard, time permitting. Since most road crews get paid per mileage, the costs for a few hours of switching is minimal, and it requires fewer yard crews.

North American railroaders have become by far the most efficient in the world. But this efficiency has come at great cost to the railroad workforce. RWU does not advocate a return to the "good old days" of railroading. However, we do advocate that those of us who move the freight and maintain the rolling stock and infrastructure - the railroad workers -- must be able to exert decisive input through our unions as it relates to our safety, dignity and quality of life on and off the job. After more than three decades of seemingly endless concessions, we say "enough!"

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