Editorial

We Must Defend Amtrak and Passenger Trains in North America

While much of the world forges ahead with modern, fast, efficient passenger train service, what’s left of the passenger train networks in the US, Mexico and Canada limp along, underfunded and neglected. In the face of NAFTA, Mexico abandoned its once extensive passenger network twenty years ago. Canada has been eliminating service for decades. And in the U.S., Amtrak has never been adequately funded, surviving with aging equipment, limited frequencies, and a skeletal network of trains.

But in recent years there have been some positive developments. In the last decade, $8 billion was allocated to improve various “shovel ready” projects to upgrade passenger rail in various parts of the U.S. Corridors in California, Illinois and Michigan have been greatly improved. High speed rail is being constructed in California, and there is talk of the same in Texas. Florida has witnessed the first private development of intercity passenger trains in well over half a century. And Congress has yet to define a President’s wishes and continues to fund Amtrak’s national network, albeit as always, in a limited fashion.

However, despite obtaining Congressional funding that would allow Amtrak to grow this year, the new Amtrak CEO/President Richard Anderson appears to have other ideas for the company. Obsessed with short-term cost cutting and deficit reduction, this former airline executive is intent on dismantling the national network, the long-distance trains, and ultimately perhaps, the company itself. It is in the interest on all rail workers, passengers, communities and the nation to not let this happen!

Starting in 2017, Railroad Workers United has been reaching out to rail passengers and rail advocacy organizations in the hope of building a strong and effective coalition of railroad workers, unions, passengers and rail advocates. We share very similar interests and together can do what we cannot accomplish alone. In addition, railroaders have natural allies in railroad retirees (National Association of Retired & Veteran Rail Employees); environmental groups (e.g. Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council); political groups (National Conference of Mayors); advocacy organizations (e.g. Rail Passengers Association; Rail Users Network, RailPAC); private car owners (e.g., Rail Passenger Car Alliance) and others, all who want expanded passenger train service. RWU plans to reach out to all of these organizations in the coming months and years, and encourages union officers, as well as rank & file railroaders to do the same.

Let’s not allow Amtrak to be scuttled by a former airline CEO, a man who has spent time at three major airlines – Continental, Northwest and Delta. While he may have had a wealth of experience there, railroading – and passenger railroading especially – is an altogether different animal. Anderson is the wrong man for the job. We need bold leadership at the helm of Amtrak, leadership that invests in the future of the company with new equipment (locomotives, passenger equipment, and station infrastructure), new routes (e.g. Las Vegas to LA; Kansas City to Texas; the Front Range; Cleveland to Cincinnati among them); increased frequencies in medium-distance corridors (e.g. Milwaukee to Chicago; Minneapolis to Chicago, Indianapolis to Chicago); and doubles the frequency on the long-distance routes in order to benefit from the economies of scale to be gained, and to serve all cities enroute at reasonable times of the day. We need leadership like that of Graham Claytor, Jr. – a lifelong railroad man - who would boldly expand Amtrak service in the 1990s, not diminish it, all while reducing its operating deficit. Amtrak today is in fact, one of the more cost efficient rail passenger systems in the entire world. Expansion - not contraction - makes economic sense!

Richard Anderson has a lot to learn about railroading. And he has a lot to learn about the public sector and public service. Passenger railroads around the world do not make money. And truth is, the supposedly “profitable” Northeast Corridor does not either. In fact, currently in need of $60 billion to bring it up to a state of good repair, means the Corridor is more expensive to operate than the long-distance trains. But all of these trains provide essential services for the travelling public and just like the nation’s highways and airline infrastructure, they are financially supported because millions of Americans rely on them. We simply cannot live without them. And just like highways, the rail infrastructure’s efficiency and performance is directly proportional to the commitment we make to it.

The largest of the rail advocacy groups – Rail Passengers Association (RPA) – has run out of patience after initially “giving him a chance.” The group is now ramping up opposition to his destruction. The Rail Users Network (RUN) is questioning whether Anderson should resign. The Rail Passengers Association of California and Nevada is likewise disenchanted. And the New Jersey Association of Railroad Passenger has outright called for his resignation. In addition, Senators and Congressmen of both political parties, from a number of Southwestern states, are furious with Anderson for his reneging on previous company agreements and for his efforts to derail the Southwest Chief (Chicago to L.A.) via Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico. Mayors of towns and cities that stand to lose service are mounting efforts to save their trains. Private rail car owners, tour groups, and rail museums are likewise frustrated. And Amtrak workers – from ticket agents, to dining car attendants, to locomotive engineers and trainmen, as well as retirees – are up in arms, concerned about the cuts in service, jobs and safety that Anderson is pursuing. All of these groups are starting to come together in coalition to defend their interests and save the Amtrak national network. RWU hopes to play a role in this important effort and urges all railroad workers and all rail unions to join the fight.

If Anderson cannot effectively manage the nation’s passenger network and increase – not decrease – the level of rail service and safety to our citizens, then he needs to step aside. The Amtrak Board must find an appropriate candidate with a wealth of railroad experience and a commitment to the national network. The nation’s railroad workers, retirees, passengers and communities deserve nothing less.

Amtrak’s California Zephyr from Chicago to Emeryville, CA is one of many long-distance trains that are under threat of discontinuance.