Positive Train Control (PTC) Will Save Lives ... But Will It Cost Jobs?

Railroad workers, trackside communities, shippers, passengers and the nation have won a great victory as PTC nears completion on most rail systems across the U.S., and soon will be implemented on numerous commuter railroads as well. PTC is a proven effective system for preventing some of the worst train mishaps and can enforce the following: temporary and permanent restrictions; Stop, Stop-and-Proceed and Restricting signal indications; Restricted Speed; protection of malfunctioning highway grade crossings; and Work Zone protection of Roadway Workers. Most every train crew can easily recall at least one scenario where such enforcements would have prevented an accident, injury or fatality. Of the twenty or so fatalities in the U.S. and Canada this past year, there is ample evidence that several of them could have been avoided with the power of PTC.

Nevertheless, the industry had long resisted the technology until forced by the Rail Safety Improvement Act (RSIA) of 2008, which was passed by Congress and signed into law in the aftermath of the head-on collision at Chatsworth, CA on September 12th, when a Metrolink commuter train ran into a Union Pacific freight train, killing 25 and seriously injuring many more. This resistance comes as no surprise given that the carriers opposed the universal application of the air brake, Janney coupler, Two-way End-of-Train Device, switch point indicators (never enforced), Electronically Controlled Pneumatic brakes (never enforced) and a host of other technologies that either did, or could have made the railroad a safer environment for workers and the general public. See The Highball Summer 2018, “The Rail Carriers’ Resistance to Basic Safety Appliances Runs Deep.”

In the coming years and decades, PTC will no doubt save scores of lives, prevent countless injuries, and save tens of millions of dollars in property damage. The rail unions, community groups, passenger advocates, environmental organizations and of course, Railroad Workers United, have all supported the implementation of PTC. We laud the fact that despite the carriers’ opposition and delays - it has finally been placed into service on tens of thousands of miles of mainline track. But unfortunately, the rail carriers may have their own ideas of how PTC – once implemented – can increase their bottom line.

First is the ever present, but looming-in-the-background threat of single employee train operations. Since November 1st, 2004, the rail carriers have advanced the idea to run trains with a single crew member. A few years after their first bargaining proposal, November 2004, they negotiated contracts with, first the BLET, for the use of Remote Control Operations (RCO) on the mainline (BNSF former BN properties 2007) and then for “utility conductors” (CSX 2008) with the UTU, to facilitate such operations. Their assumption was that they would easily play the operating crafts, and their respective unions, off against one another and be able to use either or both techniques to replace the road conductor. In July 2014, the first serious shot across the bow was fired when the BNSF and SMART-GO,1, on the former BN properties, announced a surprise Tentative Agreement (TA) to provide for a limited number of “Master Conductor” (utility conductor) positions to replace thousands of road conductor jobs. Much to the chagrin of the BNSF, the rail industry, its mouthpiece, Railway Age Magazine, Contributing Editor Frank Wilner, former UTU President Paul Thompson and the SMART GO-1 officials, the rank & file soundly defeated the TA in an unprecedented 5-to-1 vote, sending the message loud-and-clear that railroad workers do not want single employee train operations, refusing to be bribed or blackmailed into accepting them so easily.

While a victory for the working railroader, we understand that it was tactical in nature. Remember that in the TA, the BNSF was careful to make the proviso that single employee crews would begin only when PTC was cut-in and operational on a specific territory. Expecting victory, they played their hand a little prematurely. As a result, it is clear that the rail carriers plan to make the case that single employee crews are safe, responsible, and efficient on any territory where PTC is in effect. Now that it is nearing completion, we expect a full court press in the coming months/years for single employee crew implementation. We can wait for that day to come, or we can prepare for it now. But one thing for certain is that this long-awaited show-down is coming.

The second major cause for concern comes in the form of discipline and firing of train and engine crews. As Amtrak finally implemented PTC on the various host carriers this past Fall, RWU began to hear reports of engineers being “barred” from various roads for experiencing PTC initiated penalty brake applications. It remains to be seen if the rail carriers will launch an all-out assault on engineers and trainmen, but given the one-two punch of inward facing cameras and now PTC, they may just have the ability to “fire at will.” Once the next recession hits and labor is in abundance, we will find out to what extent the carriers plan to use their newfound toys to make our lives miserable.

Finally, railroad workers need to be concerned about the prospects for autonomous train operations (See Page 4). Rail CEOs and others in the industry are already speculating about the prospect and envision a future of “driverless trains.” With the assistance of technology like “Leader” and “Trip Optimizer” to efficiently run the train, and PTC to track it and enforce operating rules, the carriers and their ever-demanding stock holders are frothing at the mouth at the prospects of such a workerless windfall. While this scenario may not be possible for another decade or more, the time to organize the resistance is now.

It is ironic, but predictable, that the industry would use a safety device as a weapon against its workforce in order to achieve unrelated financial goals. Rail workers and our unions need to foresee the carriers’ skullduggery well in advance and be prepared to act. Until we have control over what technology is implemented, the way in which it is placed in service and for what purpose, we will unfortunately continue to be put between a rock and a hard place.