Senate Fails to Act on Funding; Amtrak to Commence 3X/Week Operations

As this issue of The Highball goes to press (October 1st), Amtrak is poised to reduce the frequency of practically all of its “long distance trains” that crisscross the U.S. to tri-weekly operation. In the process, the carrier will furlough more than 2,000 workers, with further reductions expected. For the national rail workforce - already decimated in freight service by Precision Scheduled Railroading (PSR), the pandemic, and the economic downturn -- this comes as more bitter news.

Hopes had been raised over the summer when the Democratic controlled House voted to approve legislation that would mandate two-person train crews, delineate limits to train length, expand the hours-of-service law coverage to the Yardmaster craft, take a critical look at PSR, institute progressive reforms and dramatically increase funding for Amtrak, among other things. But as the weeks wore on, and Summer gave way to Fall, the Senate failed to act on this and other pending legislation, dashed the hopes of railroad workers in both freight and passenger service around the country.

While the cuts are ostensibly designed to cut costs in the face of reduced ridership due to the pandemic, workers at Amtrak, together with passengers and online communities, are doubtful that the measures proscribed will save the company money. Rather, they argue that the cuts will dramatically reduce ticket revenue, drive customers off the trains, and be expensive to implement. Amtrak previously attempted tri-weekly operations in the 1990s with disastrous results, including a dramatic drop in revenue, disgruntled passengers, a precipitous drop in ridership, and numerous hidden expenses.

For years, the Class One rail carriers along with their allies in both the White House and in Congress have attempted to kill off these trains. Threats to Amtrak service have come during both Democratic and Republican administrations alike. And in recent years, even Amtrak’s own CEO - a former airline executive - attempted to kill the trains! While Republican Presidents like George W Bush and Donald Trump have clearly stated their desire to see them eliminated, it has been a cabal of rural Republican Senators and Congressmen that have traditionally stepped in and demanded that the long distance trains be included in the national network, aiding greatly in their salvation.

While the downgrading of Amtrak service will of be harmful to big cities served, it is the smaller more rural communities that will suffer the greatest hardship from the lack of train service. Many of these communities have very few transportation alternatives, as bus service continues to disappear and smaller regional airports are abandoned by the airlines. According to the Rail Passengers Association - a national organization that is working to preserve daily service - the cost to these communities in terms of economic activity will exceed $2 billion.

While no train is actually slated for elimination, concerns abound over whether this might be the beginning of the end if the 3X/week plan is executed. Bringing them back to daily service might be a struggle. Amtrak’s own metrics to determine if - and when - to return to daily service seem to suggest the company is less than excited about the prospects. And the Class One “host” railroads, more than happy to see the end of these trains, can be expected to squawk and make outrageous demands when the times comes for a return to daily service.

The fight is not over. Who knows what October and then November may hold. All rail workers are advised to keep their ear to the rail and continue to take action in defense of our trains. While the downgrading of Amtrak service will of be harmful to big cities served, it is the smaller more rural communities that will suffer the greatest hardship from the lack of train service. Many of these communities have very few transportation alternatives, as bus service continues to disappear and smaller regional airports are abandoned by the airlines. According to the Rail Passengers Association - a national organization that is working to preserve daily service - the cost to these communities in terms of economic activity will exceed $2 billion.

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