Rescue Bill Contains Key Provisions of Support for RR Workers

On March 11th, President Biden signed into a law a massive spending bill totalling some $1.9 trillion. Much of the American Rescue Plan deals with providing much needed relief from the economic malaise resulting from the ongoing pandemic. A few key provisions of the package come as especially welcome to new railroad workers. As this issue of The Highball goes to press, more than 1200 rail workers at Amtrak are in the process of being recalled to service. These workers had been furloughed last Fall when Amtrak's "long distance trains" saw frequency dropped from daily to just three-times-per-week, in a cost-cutting move that the company deemed necessary due to reduce ridership through the previous six months of the pandemic.

But patronage has bounced back dramatically, and with the vaccination proceeding apace and summer travel season approaching, expectations are high that ticket sales will soon rebound on these trains to pre-pandemic levels. The carrier states that the 12 long-distance trains were meeting the criteria that Amtrak established last Fall to determine whether or not they would return to daily service. Employees are returning to work and engaging in refamiliarization and qualifying trips, rules classes and other formalities as necessary, in order for all trains to return to daily service at the end of May/early June. While the legislation does not provide for expanded train service, Amtrak CEO William Flynn has suggested in recent weeks that the company is intent on expanding service to communities not served in years, and to eventually increasing frequency on existing routes. Citizens groups in Montana, Louisiana, Alabama, Virginia, Massachusetts, Nevada and elsewhere are pushing for these new services. After a disastrous year at the nation's railroad, things are looking up at Amtrak. According to CEO Flynn, "This funding will benefit the entire Amtrak network, out-of-state and commuter partners, customers and employees," Amtrak Chief Executive Officer Bill Flynn said in a prepared statement. "We will work closely with Congress and the Biden administration on next steps for funding to support Amtrak's long-term growth. Funding options include expanding the Amtrak network through new corridor routes, that will create thousands of new jobs, reducing our nation's carbon footprint, and helping the economy recover and flourish in the years ahead."

In addition to the good news for Amtrak and its workforce, the relief bill holds promise for railroad workers on other fronts as well. The bill provides $30.5 billion in COVID-19 emergency funding to help struggling public transit agencies nationwide, hit hard by a steep decline in ridership. The Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) will receive $21 million for long overdue Information Technology upgrades, plus $6 million for additional field staff to better serve railroad workers. The bill will waive the 7-day waiting period for Railroad Unemployment and Sickness Benefits and provide $300 per week of enhanced benefits for Railroad Unemployment Insurance, which have been extended to September 6th, 2021 for unemployed rail workers.

We're very happy to have these longstanding and important measures included in this recovery legislation," said Jeff Joines, Director of Government Affairs for the Brotherhood of Maintenance-of-Way Employees Division. "Amtrak funding will provide our members continued work. The general transit funding will keep our transit rail members working. The RRB money, which has been sorely needed for years, and will mean a much quicker response time with benefit claims. We're encouraged by this legislation and what it contains specifically for rail."