**Editorial**

**Railroaders and High Speed Rail: What Do We Need?**

As the debate (gridlock) intensifies in Washington over President Biden’s infrastructure proposals, the voices and concerns of workers and the public are being drowned out by the partisan posturing. In response, the “RWU Resolution on Rail Improvement/Development in North America” was approved at our June Steering Committee meeting. This resolution, which is posted on our website: www.railroadworkersunited.org, and the following editorial is intended to initiate and/or advance a discussion amongst railroad workers, environmental activists, passenger rail advocates, as well as the general public.

Today, the dominant narrative in the US is that any 21st century country worth anything must have special high speed rail (HSR) corridors dedicated to moving people quickly from city to city, because countries like Japan, France and even China have these systems. Secretary of the Dept of Transportation, Peter Buttigieg, has been clear about the Biden Administration’s endorsement of new HSR corridors across the country. Their current support is for previously shelved projects building new corridors focusing on high-speed passenger trains.

The knee jerk reaction of most supporters of rail, including our rail unions, is to view these projects positively. But they need scrutiny. If these plans are successful, what will the state of our rail system be?

Up until now, there has only been one real public debate about HSR. One layer of politicians and bureaucrats argue that there is no money and no political will to build new HSR projects like those in other countries, so we should fix things gradually, including incremental increases in top speed. A counter-narrative is that only a big new HSR fix can get us 21st century competitive rail operations with the latest technologies. But neither of these approaches gets us what we need, and they both pose real obstacles. A robust functioning passenger/commuter system and a clean efficient freight distribution is necessary before HSR could be a significant asset to society as a whole.

How do we get to a robust sustainable rail network that serves the interests of the public, the workforce and the environment? How can we best ensure that rail will be the transportation future that successfully confronts the reality of Climate Change? We have not had a national policy discussion BY railroaders about HSR. In general, this is normal almost 100 years after the triumph of Contract Unionism where the mantra is, “the Corporations make the decisions, and the unions negotiate wages and benefits.” But just like issues of unaddressed dangers of fatigue, crew consist, remote control and volatile oil or LNG by-rail, deferring to those who literally do not care about us is a bad, sometimes deadly idea.

We know exactly what the Carriers want. It is common knowledge that it is the explicit plan of the Carriers to run automated unit trains of literally any profitable commodity while abandoning as many subsidiary lines as possible. As soon as they can get away with it, they want to do so without crews at all. They say this repeatedly, on the record, usually in their industry publications. The extended logic will not just be loss and de-skilling of our work, but it also means a real harm to the economic viability of huge areas of the country. At its least destructive, it defunds the Railroad Retirement system.

So, what is wrong with the idea that the solution now is High or Higher Speed Rail? Most importantly, HSR, as it is proposed today, disregards freight rail altogether. New dedicated passenger HSR corridors that serve only urban centers will be counterposed to any substantive upgrades to our vital freight corridors, and challenge them for funding. Transportation inequity that exists today will be made worse yet.

One thing that railroaders who work high speed rail in the US (Amtrak in the Northeast Corridor (NEC)) know in practice is that top speed is not what makes important differences in timetables. In fact, what makes the difference is how many stops, and how much time is spent at slow speed. Today, in most city centers, that is the case for miles.

In the absence of truly brand-new straight corridors and few stops for exclusively passenger trains, the only gain for railroaders, the economy and communities is in fixing our existing corridors by eliminating slow bottom speeds and crossings at grade. Every improvement of this kind advances both freight and passenger rail service efficiency and sustainability.

This is also the way to address the issue of the monumental economic and environmental costs of acquiring brand new corridors. Raising top speed and not addressing the slowest speeds has limited impact because only short distances can attain the vaunted top speeds without major new technologies and changes to corridors.

Railroad workers know all too well that just because the technology exists, doesn’t automatically guarantee that its implementation is a good idea. Remote control engines that make 2 mile+ long, 20,000+ ton trains possible, and remote control belt-paks that have eliminated many engineers are two examples that come to mind. An important lesson is that the workforce was never consulted.

New HSR projects without input from workers and the general public as to the most efficient, rational utilization of resources that is beneficial to all, could easily turn into a debacle. How many homes would be razed? How much private property would be claimed for the “common good”? Rural communities could be cut off, access mostly only targeted to the urban centers, with little or no way to benefit others. Such new projects will not take a significant number of cars or trucks off the roads and end the hegemony of the paving lobbies that usually win the government funding competition with rail.

But by raising the lowest speeds as much as possible, wherever possible, we can attain massive economic gains for passenger
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and freight operations. If we combine this strategy with electrification, integration of the grid, elimination of crossings at grade, and other key and shovel ready improvements, the result will be a huge advance for every sector and ALL stakeholders.

Voices little heard up until now in the policy debates, that exclude railroaders, have made the obvious point that raising the lowest speeds as much as possible for our existing corridors would mean not only no major new corridors with their costs and environmental impacts, but also would guarantee continued access to the communities served in their cores. It protects and sustains the network and the possibilities it creates for the future. None of that is possible with new corridors, which can be compared to exclusive, and now no longer operative, ventures like the Concorde SST. We need and can have a robust and economically vital network that serves us in more places and in more ways, while creating and maintaining good railroad jobs. In fact, we can have the advantages of this type of approach in less time, with less money and with less impact on vulnerable areas. The good news is that we don’t need speculative and experimental technology to do this.

Important concerns about the future of “conventional” rail regarding threats from Climate Change and other urgent considerations have not, thus far, merged into the debate over how we might get 21st century rail. The Green New Deal (GND), understandably popular among millions, as currently outlined, sidesteps questions of existing rail operations, except to the extent that it would work to eliminate fossil fuel locomotion and emphasize ending subsidies and support for fossil fuel extraction and transport. Seen solely through that lens, GND proposals that do not see a more sustainable future for railroads are naturally viewed by many railroaders with hostility. It’s in our interest to push to make a sustainable railroad network, expanded and upgraded rail corridors - the Green Transportation Future - a key part of the GND. HSR, as proposed, is just as much an obstacle to that as “more of the same” Corporate railroading is.

From our inception, RWU has fiercely advocated that rank & file rail workers, through revitalized, UNIFIED unions, must assert OUR narrative, just demands and entitlements for safety and dignity on & off the job. For far too long we have allowed our union leaders to accept whatever the bosses will give us, with the “gun-to-the-head” threat that the politicians will make it worse, should we have the audacity to attempt any serious resistance. We must educate ourselves and each other on the myriad, complex issues and factors that impact us, so that we can have civilized debate/discussion amongst ourselves, in order to arrive at informed positions, as well as the necessary tactics/strategies that flow from there. Then we need to make our case to the public for their support.

That concept applies to this emerging debate/discussion as well. If we, as railroaders, do not take the lead and work for rational freight and passenger rail service, that serves the interests of the public, as a key part of the sustainable transportation future, many of our jobs, much of our industry, significant parts of our economy and our environment could be lost.

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The industry is driven by fast money hedge fund billionaires and their cut deals. There are no stakeholders at the policy table representing those who will be most adversely affected by the current direction of the industry. That must change if we want a sustainable future.

This country already has a couple of major good examples of the long-term benefits of fixing and funding our existing corridors. One was the decision to electrify the routes begun 100 years ago in what is today the Northeast Corridor (NEC). That decision, originally made to reduce coal and oil smoke in urban centers, has paid dividends many times over in that time, and still pays. It has paid dividends in health for communities and workers, as well as on things like making residential and commercial electricity available in towns and cities. It has also meant less noise for neighborhoods and less maintenance for railroads regarding both track and locomotives. Many good jobs were created while also future proofing the energy supply needs by using electrical generation that could be done in many ways.

The second big example was the early 1980s removal of crossings at grade in the NEC. These were major projects, but their benefit to railroaders and communities alike in speed, cost, lives etc. have paid off ever since. It took place quickly. It has also prevented one of the major problems that plagues the rest of the industry - crossing blocking. There are many places in the US where removal of grade crossings would also promote the feasibility and development of more commuter rail services.

All these measures and others prevent communities that now have rail corridor connections from losing them. But keeping the current conditions is slow death for the industry. The Corporations have already abandoned rail service that benefits society in general in favor of Hedge Fund-like short term operating ratio manipulation aimed at Wall Street.

In conclusion, it’s up to us to advocate and fight for policies that will be in society’s best interests, defend our workforce, expand our health and safety, protect our communities, grow the economy and take us to the future.