**Book Review**


By Fritz Edler

Railroaders should take note of an important and valuable new contribution to the North American policy debates on the future of our industry.

Thomas White is a 50+ year railroad veteran with experience across the industry and around the world. He has authored and contributed to several books on operations, policy and other aspects of railroading. His new (2020) book is a timely analysis of Climate Change and the role of railroad Corporations and railroad transportation are not the same thing. Rail can be an effective and immediate solution. White details how the specific ways US railroads are organized – with their focus on profits - prevents real efficiency and productivity from taking place. That unnecessary model costs us all in many ways.

Unprecedented droughts and wildfires, back-to-back “storms of the century”, and deadly flash flooding are only some of the effects of climate change that we already experience. All of these effects have a huge impact on railroads. Sea levels are already rising around the world, and they will impact our many low elevation roads.

From the independently verifiable data point of view, we do have a Climate Emergency. As noted in this book, “Nuclear war can make the planet uninhabitable in a matter of minutes. Climate Change will make the planet uninhabitable in a few decades. The result is the same. One just takes longer.”

No matter what you think about Climate Change personally, you should already be clear that it is one of the big gorillas in the room for railroad policy. You know that each rail corporation and entity acknowledge they must have policy positions if only for governmental compliance. Like it or not, Railroad Climate Change measures are a part of the regulatory process going forward.

White offers us a valuable tool. His book organizes the most important information needed to understand the problem and proposes a solution that we already have the resources and know-how to implement. In simple terms, White underscores the immediate and expandable benefits in greenhouse gas reduction, which cannot be achieved without a major transportation mode shift to railroads. He details the false promise of some of the most promoted Climate fixes such as Electric Vehicles (EVs) and supposedly “clean fuels”.

White argues, as RWU has (see our Resolution on Rail Improvement/Development in North America), that most so-called High Speed Rail projects are NOT Climate Change solutions. Railroaders need to understand the multiple reasons why these speculative passenger-only projects are dangerous sidetracks to our future. The successful sustainable future of railroads will be tied to using the world’s largest existing network for both passenger and freight, building it up and modernizing it. It will require using best practice infrastructure and technology. The fact that our major union organizations (BLET, SMART-TD, etc.) have been co-opted into blind, unquestioning support for HSR funding is emblematic of their failure to recognize that the current rail network has huge potential for infrastructure and employment expansion.

An important section of the book deals with White’s detailed breakdown of why and how the current US Rail Business model cannot serve us going forward. His focus is on why this current business model can’t address Climate Change. But most of his evidence also illustrates why the current model is incapable of taking us to a sustainable industry future in any set of circumstances, on any front.

The US Rail business model today is ineffective, puts us all at unnecessary risk and it doesn’t have to be that way. We know how to do better and it has been demonstrated around the world. Railroad Corporations and railroad transportation are not the same thing. Rail can be an effective and immediate solution. White details how the specific ways US railroads are organized – with their focus on profits - prevents real efficiency and productivity from taking place. That unnecessary model costs us all in many ways.

Railroaders are at a crossroads. We rail workers can play a key role in whether our industry will go the way of coal mines or be a part of the transportation future. History is full of examples where the wrong decisions led to the demise and irrelevance of technologies and whole industries. Our job is to fearlessly look at the interlocking of the economic best interests for our people and whether there will be a habitable place for us all to live without unprecedented strife.

Thomas White lays out a solid argument based on decades of real information. Railroads have always been vital. We can ensure they continue to serve our own families and society in general, as well as preventing Climate disaster. But this will require a completely different approach than that of the current industry owners and managers. It will require leadership that isn’t distorted by short term profiteering, and groveling servitude to Wall Street Hedge Fund managers. It will also require our own organizations to take an active leadership role. This book helps us track towards that necessary goal.

Fritz Edler started in the rail industry in 1978, working several different crafts, before becoming a passenger locomotive engineer for Amtrak in 1990. Fritz was a long time officer of BLET Division 482 in Washington DC, and an officer of the BLET DC State Legislative Board. He is an RWU Delegate to the Labor Network for Sustainability (LNS) and the Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED). Beginning in 2015, he was Chair of the Harding/Labrie Defense Committee, that organized international support for the railroaders scapegoated for the tragic Lac-Mégantic oil train wreck. He organized and led the BLET directed project that continues to repower antiquated and unhealthy switcher locomotives in the Washington Terminal. That project is producing the most advanced and worker friendly switcher fleet in North America.