Railroad Workers United

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The Rank & File in Action!

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RWU Statement in Support of Amtrak Gulf Coast Service Restoration

Railroad Workers United is a cross-craft inter-union caucus of railroad workers. Our membership is drawn from the ranks of all carriers across the continent. While the majority of our members are T&E workers on Class One freight railroads, we also have members who work for Amtrak, regional, short line, and commuter railroads. What our members have seen these last few years on the Class One railroads has been a serious decline in customer service, eroding safety conditions, a lack of maintenance, and poor on-time performance of both passenger and freight trains. This all coincides with the advent of so-called "Precision Scheduled Railroading" (PSR) and a sharp increase in stock prices and profits, while achieving record low operating ratios.

The PSR model of running extremely long trains on infrastructure that was not designed to handle them represents a problem, one that creates a scenario that is the antithesis of scheduled railroading. Long trains block crossings, have a propensity to break down, break in two, derail and be delayed far greater and far longer than a train of standard length. They take up a lot of track capacity. Combined with the Class One's penchant to run trains however and whenever they decide, with no set schedule whatsoever, we can understand the carriers' distaste for having to host an actually scheduled train on thei mainline. In this case it happens to be an Amtrak passenger train, but in fact, despite the misleading name of PSR, the carrier – in this case CSX – does not wish to see ANY scheduled movements upon its railroad. The operating model now in use across the continent does not facilitate scheduled movements. If the Class One railroads were in fact keeping their trains to schedule, then running a few 500-foot passenger trains each day would consume practically no track capacity at all and cause no disruption and limited need for infrastructure improvements. But when you operate on a model that cannot anticipate when a 15,000-foot train may arrive/depart Mobile, AL (or any other terminal), then such scheduled trains - as minuscule and fleet as they might be - create a problem. It is a sad day when a highly profitable railroad that only runs 11 trains a day on a mainline can demand $2.3 billion from the taxpayers for infrastructure improvements to add a handful of passenger trains on a route of 145 miles. (Note: This $2.3 billion figure is more than CSX spent on capital improvements to its entire network of 21,000 miles in 2017!)

Host railroads such as CSX and NS have a legal obligation to allow Amtrak trains to run on their infrastructure. This was part of the deal stipulated by Congress as part of the deal that relieved these railroads of their common carrier-obligations when the rail carriers bought into Amtrak at its formation in 1971. If the current operating model (PSR) makes this a challenge for the host railroad, then the carrier needs to reconsider their operating model, and implement one that actually facilitates the movement of scheduled trains. Note: There was a time in living memory when freight railroads conducted many more movements per day - together with multiple passenger train moves - on mainlines not equipped with "centralized traffic control" (CTC), modern signaling and locomotives, and ran most trains to schedule, by a system known as "train order and timetable." Given all the advanced technology of the last half century, combined with the great profitability of the U.S. rail system of the past quarter century, if they cannot run 11 freight and 4 passenger trains on this mainline today, then something is radically wrong with the way the rail corporation is running the railroad.

The American people want more trains to increase their mobility, opportunity, connectedness and all around quality of life.. They would like to see fewer trucks on the nation's highways and roadways. And they would like to breathe cleaner air and live in a safer, healthier environment. Trains are the answer to many of our deepest problems and ills as a society. Sadly, the rail carriers' thirst for next quarter profits and low operating ratios tomorrow are a huge impediment to moving forward with a modern, advanced network of freight and passenger rail in the United States in the decades ahead. Amtrak stands poised to increase service, add train frequency, and add new routes all across the country. Because much of this expansion will require access to freight rail carrier infrastructure, it is essential that the Surface Transportation Board assist in this effort to restore passenger service to the Gulf Coast. After 16 years of study, it is time to initiate the service.

CSX's claim that this service is being "forced through" without proper study and investigation is not true. Amtrak and the Federal Railroad Administration have engaged in years of data-driven studies to accurately assess the impact of restoring this service. If the freight carriers prevail and deny this minimal service restoration, then how many other potential passenger trains across the country will likewise never run? We must ensure that Amtrak has a meaningful right of access to host railroad infrastructure. Otherwise the grand plan to develop passenger train service in the United States will be unlikely to succeed.

Adopted by the RWU Steering Committee 3/2/2022

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