Passenger Rail & the Single Crew Issue

Some advocates of single employee crews for freight operations – including industry "insider" Frank Wilner and now BNSF CEO Katie Farmer -- are pointing to passenger train operations (including Amtrak) that use a single engineer in the cab of the locomotive, as evidence that freight train operations would be safe and efficient with a lone employee aboard. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Passenger train operations that utilize a single crew member in the locomotive cab always have a train crew of at least one other certified and qualified crew member on board the train at all times. The additional crew member(s) assist the locomotive engineer with many aspects of the job. They remind the engineer of impending restrictions to the train's movement and assist with interpretation and application of the rules. The crew jointly conducts job briefings before, and during the tour-of-duty when conditions change. They are there for each other, the train, and its passengers if and when emergency or disaster strikes.

Passenger locomotive engineers who do run the train -- alone in the cab -- are not subject to the conditions of freight engineers:

☐ Passenger engineers have fixed schedules, making for routine work. Freight engineers begin and end their tour of duty at random times 24/7/365. No two tour-of-duty start and end times are the same. There is little to NO predictability to a freight engineer's schedule. Studies have proven that having no fixed schedule dramatically increases crew fatigue and the likelihood of forgetfulness, mistakes, accidents, and injuroes.

☐ Most passenger and commuter train engineers work during normal waking hours. Very few passenger trains operate from midnight to 5 AM. Freight engineers regularly work at night.

☐ Extra board passenger engineers have a much better sense of when and where they will be used. Generally, passenger train start times are published and adhered to. Therefore, an extra board passenger engineer has a reasonably good idea if and when s/he might be called to work. A freight engineer -- extra board or even "pool" -- often has little idea of when s/he may be called to work, and must "protect" the board 24/7.

☐ All long distance Amtrak trains that run throughout the night in fact have an engineer and a co-engineer working together in the locomotive cab. Freight train engineers would be expected to routinely run trains through the night alone, with no one in the cab to assist.

☐ Passenger engineers make scheduled runs. Lone engineer runs are usually scheduled for less than 6 hours. The contract demands that single engineer jobs be bulletined for no more than 6 hours run time. Amtrak crews with an engineer and co-engineer are usually on duty for no longer than 8 or 10 hours. Freight engineers

however, routinely work twelve hours. It is common for a freight engineer to then await transportation to the terminal.

☐ Passenger engineers at Amtrak all have at least one day a week scheduled off work. Freight engineers generally have no guaranteed regular off days.

The Tentative Agreement on the BNSF on 2014 (which was voted down by the rank & file by a 5-to-1 margin by ALL crafts and at ALL terminals) made no such provisions for engineers who would have to operate alone in the cab of the locomotive. Katie Farmer's plan today likewise makes no such provisions. BNSF engineer runs are often hundreds of miles in length and keep them working the full 12 hours, more than twice as long as is generally expected of an Amtrak/commuter engineer. The freight engineers on the BNSF have no set schedule, no departure time, no arrival time, no return home time, no scheduled off days, and are generally "on-call" 24/7. All of this is almost never the case with passenger engineers.

Finally, make no mistake, the single passenger engineer assignment is not without controversy on Amtrak and other commuter railroads. It is highly debatable if even these operations are in fact "successful" and "safe". There are countless examples where another set of eyes and ears in the cab of a passenger train's locomotive would be very useful and make for a much safer workplace environment. Two blatant examples in recent years come to mind: Chatsworth, CA and Spuyten Duyvil, NY. In the Chatsworth wreck, a lone Metrolink engineer became distracted, apparently as a result of texting. Had a second crew member been stationed in the cab, it is unlikely that the train would have collided head-on with a Union Pacific freight train, resulting in numerous fatalities and injuries. Likewise, in the Spuyten Duyvil wreck in 2013, had two crew members been on board the Metro North train's locomotive, it is unlikely that this train would have derailed, killing and injuring a number of passengers. The lone engineer who "nodded off" and failed to slow his train for a 30 mph curve would no doubt have been alerted by his second crew member in the cab before the disaster struck … had one been there.

Regardless of whether or not single engineer passenger operations are "safe" or "unsafe", it can easily be seen that there is absolutely no comparison between current single engineer passenger operations and what is being proposed for freight service on the BNSF, despite what people like Frank Wilner and Katie Farmer might want the public to believe.

Because of the unscheduled nature of freight service, the myriad on- and off-duty times, the long hours, the night work, the lack of regularly assigned days off, and the lack of anyone else anywhere on the train to assist, the proposed single employee operations of freight trains on the BNSF has absolutely nothing in common with currently existing single engineer passenger service operations. Frank Wilner and Katie Farmer both have surely been around the rail industry long enough to know this.

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