



Railroad Workers United

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The Rank & File in Action!

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Press Release

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Rail Workers Need a Comprehensive Rail Safety Bill

Railroad Workers United (RWU) has pushed for safety improvements in the rail industry since our founding in 2008, coincidentally, the same year that the Rail Safety Improvement Act (RSIA of 2008) was signed into law. Fifteen years later, new rail safety legislation has been promulgated that ostensibly is designed to curb some of the rail industry's more dangerous and unregulated aspects.

According to RWU General Secretary Jason Doering, "The RSIA of 2008 brought some improvements to the hours-of-service law and mandated the installation of Positive Train Control (PTC). But unfortunately, so much of what was needed to make the industry safe was left out of the bill, and many of its safety provisions have never been enforced or have simply fallen by the wayside. We do not want to see the shortcomings suffered by the previous law re-enacted with the 2023 proposed law or that of the reactionary Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2014 that was all but introduced in the Senate."

"We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to win major safety improvements to the rail industry in the U.S.," proclaims RWU Steering Committee Member Matt Weaver. "While the Railway Safety Act of 2023 has potential, railroad workers are concerned with what is glaringly left out of the bill and what aspects are left to the DOT and FRA to draft, implement, and administer."

While the bill addresses a number of high-priority issues - including restrictions upon train length and weight, train crew staffing minimums, restriction upon movements of hazardous materials, and regulation of wayside detectors - it is silent on questions of:

- Proper training standards for all rail employees;
- Adequate staffing levels for both operating and non-operating crafts that would ensure adequate time off work and mitigate against fatigue;
- Predictable and defined work and rest periods;

- Sick leave provisions that would enhance safety and health on and off the job.

RWU hopes that this Act – if passed into law – can live up to the expectations of railroad workers, trackside communities, environmental activists, and all citizens concerned about safe rail operations. “However,” notes Jason Doering, “as currently written, the legislation omits key provisions outlined above. We are concerned that several aspects, such as the minimum crew staffing and maximum train lengths and weights, are seemingly left to the discretion of the Department of Transportation (DOT) and Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), federal agencies which are often administered and staffed by former rail CEO’s and management, and have a history of subverting rail safety, issuing waivers, and all too often serve the rail industry’s agenda.”

“RWU urges all those who want a safer rail industry to push for a stronger bill,” states RWU Co-Chair Gabe Christenson. “While the proposed RSA is a step in the right direction, RWU insists upon legislation that unequivocally mandates restrictions upon train length/weight; guarantees a minimum 2-person train crew without the loopholes; mitigates an end to overwork and fatigue by mandating adequate staffing levels for all crafts while providing defined work-rest periods; provides for proper training and instruction for all workers; and that guarantees proper and adequate maintenance and inspection of rail cars and locomotives, track, signals and other infrastructure.”

With all eyes focused on the rail industry - given first the national contract battle with the Class One railroads in the Fall of last year and now the horrendous derailment in Ohio - the nation has a unique opportunity to get something done. Private for-profit railroads have proven themselves incapable of self-regulating. “We cannot squander this historic opportunity,” states RWU Recording Secretary Nick Wurst. “Citizens and elected representatives of all political persuasions are outraged at the behavior of the nation’s big and powerful railroads. They want and demand safe train operations. We can do this!”

Regardless of what legislation or regulatory action comes from all this, ultimately, RWU believes that the rail industry - like all other transportation infrastructure in the U.S. and most all rail infrastructure worldwide - needs to be taken into public ownership. “As long as our vital infrastructure is held hostage to the short-term interests of Wall Street and hedge funds, we will always be on the defensive,” claims RWU Co-Chair Ross Grooters. “The Class One railroads have alienated shippers, passengers, workers, consumers, and trackside communities. For the rail industry to serve our supply chain and achieve its incredible potential as the safest, most efficient, and environmentally sensitive form of transportation, it needs to be controlled by the public in conjunction with its workers.”

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