Railroad Workers United

Solidarity ● Unity ● Democracy

The Rank & File in Action!

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January 6th, 2021

Dear President-Elect Biden:

The past four years have not been easy ones for railroad workers. We have seen our numbers drop precipitously in recent years. Last year we saw a spike in FRA reportable injuries and many serious derailments. First Precision Scheduled Railroading (PSR), then the pandemic, together with declining freight carload traffic and passenger counts have combined to decimate and demoralize the workforce.

On the regulatory front, the FRA has been headed by a lifelong rail carrier CEO who has consistently ruled in favor of the rail carriers and against organized labor. His rulings have favored rail corporations – not rail workers – from his stand on single employee operations of trains, to his rejection of ECP braking, from his refusal to issue safety regulations for the movement of LNG by rail, to his refusal to promulgate any rules for dealing with the Covid19 pandemic. Yet when the rail industry came calling for "relief" due to a self-inflicted "lack of manpower", he immediately granted it the right to abridge countless safety regulations.

Politically, our issues remain unaddressed and/or have been undermined by both the Congress and the White House. Despite excellent rail legislation being passed by the House (HR #2) this summer which would have – among other things – mandated two-person train crews, outlawed extremely long trains, dealt with blocked road crossings, fully funded Amtrak, and provided for infrastructural development and leadership reform there, the Senate failed to allow a vote on the bill. And for four years, President Trump has made it clear his disdain for Amtrak, passenger rail, and two-person crews. And despite promises of massive infrastructure development from all quarters, there has been none.

Railroad Workers United did not endorse Trump, and likewise, we did not endorse Joe Biden. Railroad workers have seen administrations come and go – Democrat and Republican – and we are not particularly happy with them. They break our strikes, fail to support passenger rail expansion, fail to fully fund Amtrak, side with the freight rail industry on major issues of concern to jobs and safety, and do little to promote rail development, jobs, and rail worker welfare.

We ask you to prove to the railroad workers of this country that we have a friend in the White House, that your promises to expand rail infrastructure, preserve and protect Amtrak, and that your vocal support of union workers – particularly rail workers - is not just a lot of hot air. As "Amtrak Joe", you have made numerous statements over the years that sound encouraging to us rail workers.

On the question of rail and rail workers, your campaign website clearly states that improving the country's railroads would be a priority under your clean energy initiatives, where you advocate for a "second great railroad revolution." You have stated that a Biden Administration "will make sure that America has the cleanest, safest, and fastest rail system in the world — for both passengers and freight." You have promised to work with Amtrak and private freight rail companies to further electrify the rail system. You have promised to restore Amtrak national network trains to daily service. You have pledged to dramatically develop rail transit infrastructure in towns and cities across the country "with strong union protections that create good union jobs." And finally, you have stated that "I am going to keep fighting for those crews, requiring two-person crews on freight trains … to safely do their job, period!" And on the question of labor and unions, you have stated that, "I am going to be the strongest labor president you ever had," and that "we are going to have an NLRB that… is fair, that actually defends workers' rights."

RWU has historically not taken a position on candidates for public office. Understanding the words of the great abolitionist and social reformer Frederick Douglas, that "If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Power concedes nothing without a demand, it never did and it never will," we believe as Eugene V. Debs did, that rail workers must "use our heads as well as our hands and get yourselves out of your present condition." Ultimately it is up to us to achieve the solidarity, the unity, the power we need to move forward. That said, given your statements of support outlined above, we expect you to aid, abet, and assist us to win our fights and achieve our goals and objectives.

We understand all too well that what a politician says before the election and what he or she actually does once in office are all too often diametrically opposed. We will be watching closely and are guardedly optimistic that you will act on your pro-rail, pro-labor and pro-worker statements. We want a President that we can be proud of based upon his record of delivering on his words, making rail and rail labor a top priority of your administration.

Best wishes in standing up to corporate America – particularly the Class One rail carriers – and their reactionary allies. Railroad workers stand ready, willing and able to play a role in the historic struggle for a bright future for rail transportation and rail workers in the USA.

Sincerely yours,

Steering Committee, Railroad Workers United