

# Opinion & Commentary

## *Crew Fatigue – The Elephant in the Room*

Random drug and alcohol testing, prohibition of cell phone use, and inward facing cameras have all been clung to by politicians under intense pressure to resolve the continuing carnage from horrific railroad industry accidents. While some of these “fixes” may have some merit, it is clear that ‘blame the worker’ is at the core of this thought process. It is imperative that we take that narrative and turn it on its head by inserting our day-to-day experiences and struggles into it. It is high time for the rail carriers and the government to confront the elephant in the room: crew fatigue. National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigations continue to validate our contention that fatigue is a major contributing factor in far too many incidents and accidents.

Fatigue comes in many forms on the railroad. The most prevalent cause is probably the carriers’ determination to run the most number of trains with the smallest number of people. We call this pool service. Pool service is made even more dangerous when it is impossible to accurately determine in advance when the service requirements of the railroad will demand employees report for duty. Some terminal operations require crews to run four different directions out of their terminals. Even if you had good marks it would be difficult to cipher when you’re going to work in that situation.

The carriers’ often conduct operations in a manner that creates fatigue on the job. Even when you’re supposedly well rested, these practices can create fatigue and must be considered as well if we’re going to thoroughly address this issue. Calling train crews hours before their train actually arrives at a crew change point is an operational practice that the carrier may or may not have been able to control. If crews are on held-away-from-home penalty time, it is often done to reduce the crews held away pay. Sitting for hours waiting for your train to arrive causes fatigue. Ordering crews when it is known that the crew will only go a few miles and will be held for hours, or long, deliberate delays enroute as the train isn’t wanted at it’s receiving terminal. Delays and the associated stress caused by being in long lines of trains, back to back, right on each others blocks, constantly on high alert. Hour after hour of operating under restricted speed conditions is very stressful and fatiguing. Stress caused by being on high alert on account of a large number of Form B’s (work orders) exacerbates fatigue. Interdivisional runs or extremely long runs are unpredictable and the potential is there for many stress-inducing factors that produce fatigue. Extremely loud whistles, and warning horns/alarms produce stress/fatigue. Any long or prolonged delays before, after, or en route produce fatigue and loss of focus. Given some thought, we could continue in this vein.

The solution may cost the railroads more money. The railroads are betting that with the installation of PTC they may have an extremely high entry fee, but they will eliminate the costs of labor, which they are betting will offset and exceed these initial ‘entry’ fees. Because these systems are so complicated, I’m not sure that is a good bet ... but they are well on their way down this avenue. Railroads have traditionally done all they can to eliminate costs while ignoring the issues that create those costs. For example, crews once got ITD (initial terminal delay) and FTD (final terminal delay). When conditions or operating practices caused large delays at a crew’s initial or final terminal, the crew received additional pay. The carriers *could have* used this information to make

the railroad more efficient by identifying problem areas and issues and acting to correct them through insightful operating practices. Instead they worked with their labor relations department to eliminate the agreements that provided operating crews with payments for these delays. Problem solved? NOT. In moving to PTC rather than addressing the central issue that causes human failures and fixing it, they are doing the same thing.

Behavior based safety programs aimed at blaming the worker rather than addressing the unsafe practices or conditions that end up hurting or killing our members is another effort by rail management to ignore the problem but eliminate the costs (or shift the blame). Our wages and benefits are also a way railroads hope to reduce their costs and increase corporate management bonuses. Under existing realities, our livelihoods are dependent on the railroads’ success. That said, when that “success” comes at the cost of our lives and endangers the public, then it’s time for us to go on the offensive against this “elephant.” As rank & file workers, WE need to confront this issue of fatigue, and demand that our unions hold the carriers and the FRA accountable. Here are a few examples of demands that our unions could put forth in the current round of national negotiations. We could start with requiring continuous held away pay for operating crews at their away-from-home terminals. Long lay-overs at a crews away-from-home terminals contributes to the disruption in employees circadian rhythms and further reduces their ability to ‘absorb’ stress on a subsequent tour of duty. This would be a good start. Real reform would require the establishment of regularly scheduled jobs on every set of trains that could be established. One idea for those jobs that remain in pool service or extra boards, is to set up ‘windows of availability’ where four six-hour windows are established that crews bid on by seniority. When your window ‘closes’ you no longer have to make yourself available for call, although you could exercise the option of answering the phone after your window closes if you want additional work. The carriers would have to reduce your available hours of service by the number of hours your call exceeded your window. For example, if you were called two hours after your window closed, your hours of service would be reduced to 10 hours. The ‘windows’ for crews at their away-from-home terminals would open immediately after they become rested, and would require them to remain available for 6 hours. Crews not used within their windows at their home terminals would receive a guarantee day; crews not used within their windows at their away-from-home terminals would be transported back to their home terminals.

There are obviously countless ways to improve on the current random and arbitrary labor supply system that would do a much better job of addressing fatigue in the railroad industry than current practices. Our jobs are to find them, or be prepared for the railroads’ end-run around problems with ‘solutions’ that reduce costs, at least in the short term, while ignoring the real problems.

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