

Crew Consist Report

Single Person Train Crews: Irresponsible, Inefficient, and Unsafe - Part 2

In Part 2 of this 2-part series, RWU explores and analyzes the dangers and pitfalls of the Class One rail carrier proposal to run trains with a single crew member. Part 1 was featured in the Summer 2020 issue of *The Highball*.

Degraded Knowledge, Wisdom, Railroad Culture, Mental Health, and Solidarity

The locomotive cab today – as it has been for more than 150 years – is a rolling classroom, where the older more seasoned worker of the crew mentors the younger, where the more knowledgeable teaches the neophyte, and where both crew members discuss the railroad in all of its facets. Invaluable lessons are taught to one another, as the two crew members share tales, vignettes, and “war stories” about an endless array of scenarios and circumstances, and what they did to find a solution. The two may discuss ways to improve railroad operations, criticize inept dispatching, analyze the history of this or that operating rule, or compare notes on ways and means of dealing with certain scenarios that come along in the course of any given tour of duty. They may discuss the union contract, pay, benefits, union rules and procedures and more. They are involved, interested, and “in the game.”

With single person crews, this classroom comes to an end. The carrier and the union lose this invaluable training ground, this sharing of vital information and ideas about rules, operations and yes, safe practices. The workers lose a valuable source of wisdom and knowledge, literally forfeiting information that could, at minimum, make for a better quality of work life and at most, in fact save a life. The worker would spend future shifts all alone, with no one to ask questions of, bounce ideas off, and share her/his own valuable knowledge with. The loneliness, boredom and stress of constantly working all alone in isolation has the potential to be unfulfilling and boring, leading to a decline in job satisfaction, an increase in turnover rates, and a decline in professionalism and longevity. As a result, the collective wisdom of railroad workers would decline, along with their collective mental health and solidarity. With no one to connect with nor share ideas and knowledge with, no one to stand up for and be stood up for, solidarity and the collective identity would inevitably decline. Railroadng might come to be no longer a life career choice, but a way to spend a few years to make some money, again, diminishing collective knowledge and wisdom.

A Decline in Efficiency

The rail carriers emphasize how efficient single crew trains will be. They understand of course, that when a train needs to be “worked” on the mainline, it will be a much smoother, quicker and safer operation with two crew members present in the cab of the locomotive. But when they say “efficient”, they mean less labor costs. And the savings that would accrue under single crew member train operations would be substantial. Hence, their drive since 2004 to implement such operations.

But the economic gains that might be achieved by the elimination of the second crew member will be offset to one degree or another by the inherent inefficiencies of single person operations. Ironically, it was none other than Hunter Harrison, the godfather of Precision Scheduled Railroadng (PSR) which has degenerated into a Wall Street driven scheme to deliver short-term profits by “streamlining railroad operations” and a major force behind the drive for single person crews, declared his opposition

to single person crews shortly before he died in 2017 while at the helm of CSX. “I’m not a one-man crew advocate,” he stated in the Spring of that year, although he did note that there could be possible limited applications for such crews, e.g. switching at mines. “But today, to take a 20,000-ton train on line-of-road, with one person, I don’t think it’s good business,” Harrison added, citing safety concerns and the value of an extra set of eyes and ears in the cab. Plus, he claimed, it would pose unacceptable delays when a lone crew member had to contend with a broken air hose or a knuckle failure (see below).



Trains on the Mainline

There are a few circumstances when the lack of another crew member in the lead locomotive stands to impede the forward progress of a train under routine conditions. Some examples include:

- When cars are set out/picked up enroute, the conductor must make note of the train’s changed makeup, noting particularly the location of hazardous loads in the consist. Without a conductor aboard, able to do this while the train is in motion, the remaining crew member would be responsible for this task, delaying the train’s forward progress until the task is complete.
- Anytime the lone employee must use the restroom while the train is in motion, the operator must bring the train to a complete stop.
- When the lone operator is in doubt of a specific rule, s/he must bring the train to a stop and check.
- Anytime the lone employee in the cab wishes to make adjustments to the cab interior (e.g. duct taping drafty cracks, adjusting the left-side mirror, retrieving materials from the nose of the engine, or otherwise having to leave the control stand, s/he must bring the train to a stop. OR perform these activities while the train is in motion, compromising safety.

But the major inefficiencies that will be incurred by the railroad is when the train has an issue that requires it to be “worked.” While not routine, these circumstances are not rare. Trains stop – or must be brought to a stop – under a wide variety of circumstances. Broken knuckles or drawbars, shifted loads, dragging equipment, hot journal bearings, flat wheels, a front-to-rear “No Com” failure of an End-of-Train (EOT) device, failed wayside detectors, busted or separated air hoses, excessive

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brake pipe leakage, and stuck vent valves are some of the many reasons a train may be brought to a stop.

Once stopped, a train with a two-person crew works together to rectify the problem, make the necessary inspections, set-outs, repairs, air tests, etc. and then proceed onward. Without that second crew member, a disabled train would be required to wait for the "Utility Conductor" to arrive before the train can be worked. In fortunate circumstances, this might take a matter of minutes. However, in less fortunate circumstances, this could take a lot longer, depending upon a host of factors:

- The location of the utility worker. S/he could be many miles away.
- The location of the train and its isolation from major highways and arteries.
- The potential that the train is at a location void of any type of access road.
- Time of day and the weather conditions.
- The availability of the utility worker, who might currently be otherwise engaged in another task with another train somewhere on the subdivision.
- How long the utility worker might be engaged with that other train before being freed up to service the second train.

In addition to mechanical issues with a specific train, track and signal malfunctions and irregularities also cause trains to come to a stop, requiring assistance prior to resuming forward progress. Some of these include:

- Automatic track switches that are improperly lined for the desired route, that must be taken "off power" and be operated by hand in order to proceed.
- A road crossing with an "activation failure" of the warning devices, which must be "flagged" with the assistance of a second worker.

The delay would be minimal if a "utility worker" was close at hand. However, just as with the train mechanical failures outlined above, the delay could be quite lengthy.

Trains in the Yard

When a mainline train enters a yard, the crew often must line a series of switches to bring the train along the desired route into the intended track. This can amount at times to as many as a dozen switches being thrown. For the operator to dismount and line the switch or switches, walk back to the engine, pull forward to the next set, dismount and do the same, is a time consuming and cumbersome operation. (NOTE: because the operator would be leaving the train unattended, it is debatable whether this is even within the rules to take such an action without applying sufficient handbrakes). The alternative would be to wait for the utility worker – if one was in fact on duty and available – to handle the switches. Though automatic switches do exist in some yards, their implementation throughout the entire industry is still far down the road.

Summary

Train operation with a lone employee on the locomotive is time consuming and inherently inefficient. Train operations will necessarily be slowed down without the second crew member at hand for a multiplicity of tasks throughout any given tour-of-duty. The lack of the conductor will increase the time it takes for the average train to get from point A to point B. Track capacity on any given mainline will be reduced accordingly.



A routine crew change at Dunsmuir, CA on Union Pacific. Now that the carriers may not bargain nationally for single person train crews (see Page 1), we must prepare for an attack on a specific property.

Long delays will be common, including delays to Amtrak and other passenger operations. Where these long delays take place on single track territory, the Subdivision or the entire Division stands to be backed up for days. If the disabled train is in a remote location, the ripple effect would be even worse. Add inclement weather into the mix, and the need to re-crew the train as the operator has now exceeded the hours-of-service law, and the delay becomes even more significant. As coal continues to decline and railroads look to other sources of revenue – such as high priority high value freight – the nation's railroads need to be fluid and unencumbered. As a nation, we should ensure that trains are expedited across the territory as quickly as possible, and able to take millions of carloads of goods off the nations overcrowded and crumbling highways. Single employee crews on freight trains will not facilitate the rail transportation system we so vitally need going forward.

Conclusion

Running trains in much of North America with a single crew member is a terrible idea which will lead to a decline in safe and efficient railroad operations. The two-person crew has been standard practice for three decades now. During those 30 years, the railroad has rebuilt and prospered, recaptured lost freight traffic, and improved the physical plant. The railroad stands poised to enter a new phase, one of robust growth and development, where millions of tons of freight and millions of passengers leave the highways and ride the rails instead. Any move to single person train crews stands to cripple the railroad infrastructure, rendering it incapable of handling such an increase in traffic. Railroads are more vital than ever to our nation's health and well-being, and must be ready, willing and able to get the job done safely and efficiently in the coming years and decades. Trains crewed with a lone employee would be a devastating blow to workers, shippers, passengers, communities along the right-of-way, and the national interest.

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