



BROTHERHOOD OF LOCOMOTIVE ENGINEERS & TRAINMEN

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: MARCH 30, 2020

What we always knew: Engineers and Trainmen are Essential to the American Economy

**BY DENNIS R. PIERCE,
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(BLET Editor's Note: The following message from BLET National President Dennis R. Pierce has been excerpted from the February/March 2020 issue of the Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen News.)

INDEPENDENCE, Ohio, March 30 — Over the last month or so, lives have been turned upside down for millions of Americans due to the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). From work-at-home orders and shelter-in-place directives ... to the closing of schools, restaurants and businesses ... the work lives and home lives of growing numbers of Americans have changed drastically. In ways seen and unseen, the spread of this virus has affected us all.

Many American workers have seen their jobs vanish, but as with all railroad workers, BLET members have seen their jobs become increasingly more important to the nation. We move the products that power our nation and the food that feeds our citizens. We play an integral role in our nation's economy, and without us, our nation would collapse. In many ways, BLET members are the nation's ultimate essential workers.

But then, engineers and trainmen already knew that. For well over a century and half, they have labored in relative anonymity, operating the nation's freight and passenger trains at all hours in all conditions. Their 24/7, 365 day a year jobs are what move the grain that feeds the nation, the coal that powers our homes, the vehicles American's drive, and the products that stock the shelves of the stores in our great nation.

It is unfortunate, however, that in many cases, certain of the nation's rail carriers still don't seem to understand just how important their employees are to our nation's survival and recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. While some rail carriers have made significant strides in providing a safe and healthy workplace for Engineers and Trainmen, others continue to ignore the concerns of their employees, and their unions.

That's why we have focused our Union's efforts in recent weeks to demand that the railroad industry provide a clean, safe and sanitized workplace inside all crew rooms, in all locomotive cabs, and at all layover facilities throughout the country. BLET's General Chairmen continue to meet with their respective rail carriers on an almost daily basis in an



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effort to improve workplace conditions. BLET's State Legislative Board Chairmen continue to work with Government agencies to ensure that the regulatory protective net is preserved.

All the while, it is the BLET rank-and-file membership and Local Division Officers providing the detailed reports of both success stories towards a safer workplace, as well as the cases of what can only be called a blatant disregard for the health and safety of railroad operating crews. Our common goal is to insist that the nation's railroads provide a safe workplace so that all hard-working railroad employees can do their part to get America through this national emergency. Unfortunately, there are more reports of outright failures to provide a safe and sanitized workplace than there are reports of that being accomplished.

For this reason, I have personally called several Class I CEOs in the past two weeks to let them know where they must work to improve their efforts. Although almost every Class I railroad has issued a policy statement on shared workplace and locomotive cab cleanliness, we know that in application those policies are failing far too often. Our demands towards a clean and safe workplace are threefold.

First, the nation's rail carriers must work harder to get the sick employees out of the workplace so that those employees can start the healing process without the threat of job loss hanging over their heads. In the way of that shared goal are two decades of attendance policies, now "institutionalized" into the railroads' management style. It is clear that all Americans, and all American corporations, must evolve to survive the pandemic. But it has also become clear that many railroads' institutional distrust of their employees, as evidenced in draconian attendance policies, is in the way of getting the sick employees away from the workplace so that the healthy employees can have some assurance that the workplace will not be where they get ill. It appears that many of the nation's freight carriers have spent so much time chasing after the small number of employees who don't work enough by arbitrary carrier standards that they have forgotten how to fairly treat the vast majority of their employees who are just here to do their jobs. The nation is counting on this latter group, but clinging to policies that prevent sick employees from taking time away from work for fear of termination or financial harm is preventing what should be a shared goal of providing a safe and healthy workplace for the healthy employees to do their jobs.

Second, the nation's rail carriers must work harder to clean the workplace once the sick employees have been given the time off that they need, so that the nation's hard-working "essential" engineers and trainmen can come to work without fear of infection. That includes cleaning all shared on-duty stations, but more importantly, includes providing locomotive cabs, crew hauling vans, and hotels that have been cleaned and sanitized. There is much work to do here, and our General Chairmen are directly forwarding all failure reports to their respective carriers on a daily basis.



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Finally, the nation's railroads must begin the process of properly staffing the industry to meet the nation's needs. In 2019, over 20,000 railroad workers were furloughed, and it is clear an industry running this lean on employees does not have the flexibility to weather this national emergency. Whether it be recalling shop craft employees to sanitize locomotives, or recalling operating crews to backfill for those sick employees who should be out of the workplace healing, the railroads must get away from their Precision Scheduled Railroading job cutting mindset if they expect to do their part to get our great nation through this national emergency.

Having sent letters to the heads of the three railroad industry groups (the National Railway Labor Conference, the American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association, and the American Public Transportation Association) as well as the Federal Railroad Administration on all of these issues without noticeable nationwide improvement, I must now take these issues directly to each and every railroad CEO, their respective Boards of Directors, their shareholders, and the general public with this message;

Enough with the vague policy talk about "relaxing" attendance policies for those testing positive for COVID-19. Railroad employees are not doctors, and they are not qualified to know if their symptoms are related to the spread of the virus, related to influenza, or even a common cold. If railroads are sincere in their advice that they want sick employees out of the workplace, they must publicly state to their employees that all illness-related absences will be excused during this national emergency. Now is not the time to quibble over which illness it is that made an employee sick, especially when even getting a COVID-19 test is virtually impossible in many parts of the country. "Sick is sick," and until the nation's rail carriers fairly treat their sick employees, they will continue to come to work, by coercion, eliminating all hope that the healthy employees are being provided with a virus-free workplace.

Railroads must also reconsider their refusals to provide additional paid leave to sick employees so that they can afford to leave the workplace when they are ill. Other transportation companies like J.B. Hunt, whose containers are routinely hauled by the nation's railroads, have adopted additional paid leave policies for that very reason. Target, one of nation's largest retailers — where the same products that railroads haul are sold to the public — has also adopted additional paid leave policies for its sick employees. Invest in your employees; get the sick people off the property without financial ruin so that the healthy people can get our nation through the pandemic.

The railroad industry must also redouble its efforts to provide all operating crews with a clean and sanitized workplace. Redouble your efforts to provide safe and sanitized transportation to and from trains, as well as ensuring that the lodging facilities provided by rail carriers have improved their sanitation. Requiring healthy crews to board locomotive cabs that could have been occupied for 12 hours by someone ill with COVID-19, with no tools to clean that cab, is completely irresponsible. Requiring 4 or more crew members to share transportation in a minivan is equally



PRESS RELEASE

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irresponsible, as is forcing crew members to sit in their away from home terminals in questionable hotels with no food available for way longer than their needed legal rest. Conditions are so deplorable in some cases that we are approaching the point of needing hazard pay for those who must work in them.

Ignoring these issues has created a workplace environment that is completely contrary to the carriers' obligation to their employees' health and safety. The nation's rail carriers must take the actions noted here immediately if they expect to meet the needs of our great nation. The hard-working operating crew members and their unions stand ready to do their part in that effort; it's time for the railroads to step up to the plate and do their part.

This is a difficult time, but I have never been more proud of our membership and our Union. Our members are on the front lines, day in and day out, to keep America stocked with the necessities of life. Their dedication in the face of this rapidly changing situation can only be described as heroic, and I am honored to serve as their National President.

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The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) represents more than 58,000 professional locomotive engineers and trainmen throughout the United States. The BLET is the founding member of the Rail Conference, International Brotherhood of Teamsters.