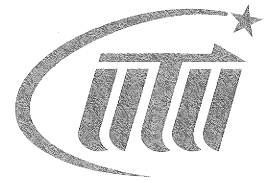


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Dear Sirs:

Nothing is more important to the United Transportation Union than ensuring each of its members returns to their family in one piece. This is no simple objective because, as we know, the railroad environment is unforgiving.

Compounding the unforgiving environment of the workplace is the fact that trains typically carry deadly hazardous materials, crew members unpredictable and rotating work schedules with minimal time off (resulting in fatigue), and a substantial increase in rail business is requiring a substantial boost in hiring, with many of today's train and engine-service employees not having more than a year of combined experience.

This combination of an unforgiving workplace, crew-member fatigue, the transportation of deadly hazardous materials and the increasing number of new hires among crew members poses an increasing threat of a horrendous calamity.

The UTU has been warning for years that if labor and management do not jointly reach a negotiated agreement on solving the fatigue problem, Congress will step in – probably after a deadly calamity – and impose a less efficient solution not to the liking of either of us.

With the strong growth in rail traffic and the corresponding acceleration of new hires, training has become as important an issue as fatigue – and I again call upon you to face up to this problem through joint negotiations aimed at a mutually acceptable solution.

An adequate training program is also an integral part of any strategy for attracting and retaining qualified employees. It is becoming apparent even to opinion leaders and decision makers outside the rail industry that training is not adequate and safety is being compromised. We agree on the benefits of raising hiring standards to ensure the attraction of career employees; but those career employees must also be properly trained to ensure they are productive and safe workers.

The stress caused by trying to perform tasks beyond the scope of training received and beyond the ability of equipment being used has created unnecessary long-term problems. A well-trained employee knows the limitations of his/her training and will ask for additional instructions or help. An employee improperly trained will consistently try to perform the questionable task out of fear of being sanctioned.

One of the main factors in the safe implementation of remote control operations over the past two years was the fact that a seasoned workforce, with experience in switching operations, was trained to utilize new equipment to accomplish the same tasks. We cannot assume that new employees with no rail operations experience can learn how to perform the required tasks with only a minimal level of training.

The fatigue problem is going to be solved through regular start-times, start windows, sufficient uninterrupted rest periods and predictable work-rest cycles. But for crew members to be qualified, they must be properly trained.

The UTU is concerned that carriers, for budgetary reasons, have been cutting back on training even though the size of the “seasoned” workforce is shrinking through normal attrition and the size of the “rookie” workforce is growing rapidly. Today, following formal training, there are far fewer opportunities for new hires to work with seasoned operating employees. This has proven to be penny wise and pound foolish. Railroads have paid many times over for the lack of adequately training new employees.

Although carriers measure the cost of training – which too frequently leads to cutbacks in length of training so as to save money – carriers fail to measure the cost of insufficient training. That cost is tallied in derailments, injuries, fatalities and customer-service failures and lack of retention of new employees.

The most obvious shortcoming in training occurs when new hires are rushed through a minimum training period and then assigned remote control duties where operating officers already are stretching the envelope in terms of employee and equipment capabilities. Where strong mentoring programs are in place, this shortfall is identified and corrected. The one-size-fits-all programs do not produce good results in all new employees. A mentoring program determines which employees need additional training and focuses that training where needed.

Time after time we see examples of 14-week training periods cut short – sometimes in half – and those new hires then immediately placed in a remote control assignment or teamed with another new hire to handle a high-tonnage train outside yard limits.

Many new hires are so unfamiliar with the work environment – and with no “grey heads” available to mentor them – that they are prone to making serious errors in judgment. Even experienced veterans cannot use remote control equipment to perform tasks that it was not designed to do.

Worse, carriers are using remote control technology on heavy tonnage trains – and assigning new hires to the task.

We are hearing reports of high tonnage trains being operated by remote control technology where only the engine brakes are used to stop the train. Remote control technology was not designed to move 10,000-ton, 100 car trains – yet it is not uncommon for carriers to be using that technology in such a manner. Remote control technology in use today was not originally designed for such applications, and significant additional training will be necessary to remedy the situation.

The inescapable fact is that today’s training does not address on-the-job conditions. In violation of federal regulations, new hires are NOT being trained for the most demanding service conditions they will encounter. This shortfall in training is also affecting carrier operations in a significant manner.

The UTU asks that you agree to the following:

- Re-evaluate employee training to ensure not only the length of training is sufficient, but that new hires are trained in the territory they will work and have access to mentors who will continue to monitor their progress. Ensure that every new hire is trained for the most demanding service conditions they will encounter; and if new hires have not been so trained that they not be assigned to the work.
- Cease using remote control technology for tasks that exceed the design limitations of the equipment.

- Cease assigning new hires to remote control assignments until they have had additional on-the-job experience and become familiar with the unforgiving railroad environment. A new employee must first learn the mechanics of switching operations before learning how to switch with remote control devices.
- Designate a period of time that the new employee will be required to work with a seasoned veteran. We call that, mentoring – and it has been used successfully in the railroad industry for 150 years.
- Re-evaluate training programs. Operating practices, brake-test requirements and operating rules change constantly. Training should be on-going. Employees should be re-evaluated for re-training in newer technologies and practices, as well as training in application of rules. This training should include interaction with a company officer.

The UTU is ready, willing and able to consummate agreements for formal, balanced and comprehensive training programs to effectuate a safe and productive workplace, but we need a partner – the carriers.

Sincerely,



Paul C. Thompson
International President

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