



# BLET Auxiliary News

*Working to bring about safer working conditions for Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen, educate spouses, and enhance the lifestyles of railroad employees and their families.*

Volume 10, Number 4

Winter 2019

Kathleen Bisbikis, President • Jodi Lynn Wallace, 1st Vice President • Lawana Poss, Secretary • Terri Fleming, Treasurer  
Jessica Cole, 2nd Vice President/National Legislative Representative • [www.bletauxiliary.net](http://www.bletauxiliary.net)



Daylen and Erin Lake with Baby Forrest at Oregon Health & Science University Hospital in Portland



Stay strong, Baby Forrest!

## A Pacific Northwest BLET Family in Crisis

By Jessica Keene, President, Pacific Northwest Auxiliary No. 503

Daylen Lake followed in his dad, Johnnie Lake's shoes as a part of the BSNF railroad. Daylen is in his 15th year of employment at BNSF and is a part of BLET Division Number 842. He is catching up to his dad Johnnie, who has 18 years under his belt working the rails. He and his wife Erin married in 2010, and relocated in 2014 to Klamath Falls, Oregon. In August 2015, they welcomed a baby girl and named her Lilliana. All that was left was to bring a son into their family to carry on the Lake name and maybe even the railroader tradition.

Their dream was complete on March 13, 2017, when they welcomed their baby boy at 39 weeks. Hunter Alen Keoni Lake was perfect. Erin and Daylen spent the next 24 hours cuddling their little bundle of joy and all was right with the world... until it wasn't.

Erin noticed bubbles coming from Hunter's mouth and knew immediately that something was wrong. Hunter was taken to the nursery for monitoring and fed some glucose to stabilize his blood sugar. After a chest X-ray, it was revealed that Hunter's heart was enlarged, filling his entire chest cavity.

Leaving sister Lilliana with her grandparents, Daylen and 30-hour-old Hunter flew via Life Flight air ambulance to Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU) Hospital in Portland, leaving a worried Mommy Erin, who was still hospitalized, recovering from her cesarean section. Daylen sent messages about Hunter's treatment and boasted about the skilled doctors and nurses OHSU employs and how comforting it was knowing Hunter was getting the best care possible.

The next month was a roller coaster with many ups and downs. It was often one step forward, two steps back. On the day Hunter turned 12 days old, Daylen and Erin were thrilled, knowing that Hunter was stable and being prepared for his trip home in three more days. Those plans were halted when they learned the results of one more echocardiogram that showed Hunter's heart function was down and that he would need a heart transplant by age 20. The next day they learned that Hunter would need a heart transplant by age one, and the day after that, Hunter's heart stopped. Erin received the call saying Hunter had been resuscitated and they now had one hour to make one of two choices. They could transfer Hunter, flying him 668 miles away to Stanford, for a heart transplant evaluation and maybe get on the list for a possible transplant, or stay, surrounded by their support system of family and friends, and pray for a miracle. They made the difficult choice to stay

— continued on Page 10



# From the President

BY KATHLEEN BISBIKIS

*"I have one life and one chance to make it count for something..."*

*"My faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I am."*

*"Whenever I can for as long as I can with whatever I have to try to make a difference"*

— Jimmy Carter

As we head into the holiday season and a New Year, I encourage you all to spend time with friends and family and make the memories that will eventually be the things that you remember for the rest of your lives. It won't be the gifts under the tree or what you wear to the Christmas party that you will look back on with fond emotion. It will be the people you spent time with—the laughter, the jokes and the stories—that will stay with you as the years move on. Make every effort to be in the moment and not in your phone.

As 2019 draws to close and I reflect on what has transpired during this year, I am feeling much gratitude for everyone who has helped us grow stronger and more prevalent. Our Auxiliary continues to grow in numbers as more spouses become involved and new local auxiliaries are formed. I'm also excited about the growth of our newsletter and grateful for the sponsorship of the North American Railway Foundation.

Many thanks also to Cornerstone Benefits Management for all that they do for the BLET members and their families across the nation, and for helping the Auxiliary with funds to purchase raffle prizes for our scholarship raffles at the regional conventions.

Scholarship season begins in January. I encourage those of you who are parents of college-bound

children, to have them apply for our scholarships. As a mother of a college student, I am fully aware of the costs associated with higher education. Every little bit of financial support these kids receive is greatly appreciated.

I would ask that everyone please take a moment, even during the busy holiday season, to continue to make phone calls and send e-mails in support of HR 1748 and S. 1979, the Safe Freight Act (two-person crew) bills.

As we head into an election year, it's important that we join together and work with each other, and not against one another. Participation from everyone will be vital if we expect to make the necessary political changes that ensure the safety of our union. Please take the time to educate yourselves on which candidates will be most likely to support the causes that affect the safety and livelihood of our railroad employees and their families. And, most importantly, please do your part by casting your vote and encouraging your friends and family to do the same.

In closing, thank you to the team of Auxiliary National Officers who support this organization. This is a team effort and we are so fortunate to have an amazing group of motivated and capable individuals getting the job done month after month.

Lastly, I wish everyone a very Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

---

**Kathleen "Kat" Bisbikis**  
**National President, BLET Auxiliary**  
**7367 Stabulis Road**  
**Valley Springs, California 95252**  
**209-786-7367**  
**[Biz4413@gmail.com](mailto:Biz4413@gmail.com)**

Find us on the web at [www.bletauxiliary.net](http://www.bletauxiliary.net)  
Also...

Find us on   
THE NATIONAL B.L.E.T. AUXILIARY





A SEASON TO BE JOLLY

# HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO EVERYONE!

The National BLET Auxiliary



## SPRINGFIELD AUXILIARY JOINED IN TO HELP AT BNSF ANNUAL FISH FRY



Springfield, Missouri BLET And SMART unions teamed up for their annual fish fry at the depot. The fish fry runs for 48 hours and feeds all the BNSF employees who come through the depot during that time. Members of Springfield's Auxiliary No. 417 helped out this year by providing baked goods and assisting with the set-up and serving. Working alongside the union members gave the auxiliary members a chance to get to know the BLET members better and to serve our railroaders. Pictured at left: Charles Lucas, Eric Burrell, Rachel Pharris, Heather Williams, Joel Comeau, and Johnathon Rosenthal.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE AUXILIARY

My name is Victoria Delahay and I am a new railroad wife. My husband and I just recently celebrated two years of marriage and he is a long-time railroader. I knew of some of the struggles that railroaders endured, but I never quite knew the extent of this lifestyle until we were officially married. And yes, it really is a lifestyle. He is always on call and I never know if I'm going to be without him on weekends, holidays, family events, etc. After we were married, I was so lonely. Sure, I worked, and his family was close, but he was always on the road. I wasn't used to the crazy shifts and unpredictable schedule and it didn't feel like I had anyone else that I could talk to who would understand exactly what I was going through, what I was struggling with.

It wasn't until almost a year into our marriage that I heard about this railroad spouses "auxiliary." I thought to myself, "what the heck is that?" Merriam-Webster defines the word "auxiliary" as the offering or providing of help, or something that functions in a subsidiary capacity. It sounds technical and clinical, but it is so much more than that. The BLET Auxiliary is a group of wives, husbands, moms, dads, daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, retirees, and many more who are related to a BLET member, who gather together for one mission. Our mission is to support our spouses and loved ones on the front line. We fight for and support national and local bills and legislation to help our brothers and sisters. We support and promote education related to railroad safety. We discuss what is happening nationally, locally, and right here in our own communities. We provide support for one another in good times and in bad. I am not a mother, not yet at least, so my connection to these wonderful women is my role as a railroad wife. My auxiliary sisters and brothers never made me feel less-than. Each one of them brought something to our group. These auxiliary members, most of whom are women, embraced me, loved me, and helped me understand my purpose as a member of this group and what I need to know.

The Auxiliary has made me strong - strong enough to know that I will be okay during those times that I don't see my husband for days on end, and strong enough to fight for issues in order to make the rails safer for everyone. I was a member of Nor Cal 39 Auxiliary for just a year before my husband and I relocated to Amarillo, Texas. I was saddened to learn that there is not an active local auxiliary the Amarillo area, so I decided to start one myself. For over two months, I have campaigned and met with many spouses and shared my story. As a result, I am pleased to announce that in January we will have an official auxiliary!

So what is my point here? It's simple! In the short time that I have been an auxiliary member, this group has changed my life. It's not about how many meetings you can attend or how social you are. It's all about support, education, and having and/or offering a shoulder to cry on when times get tough. They didn't just become my friends, they became family, and I couldn't imagine not having them in my life. So, with that, I encourage all of you to join your local auxiliary. If you don't have one in your area, start one! I guarantee you it is one of the best things you'll ever do.

If you have any questions about joining or starting your own Auxiliary, please do not hesitate to reach out and contact the National BLET Auxiliary, even if you just have general questions. Please also feel free to contact me.

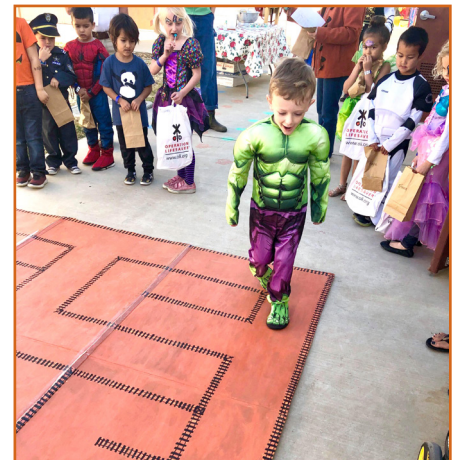


**Pictured above: Top: Matt and Victoria Delahay; Center: Kathleen Bisbikis, Victoria Delahay, and Ash Lynn; Bottom: Serena Kelling, Victoria Delahay, and Oscar Burrola.**

*Victoria Delahay is a member of Nor Cal 39 Auxiliary in Stockton, California. She and her husband recently relocated to Amarillo, Texas, where she is spearheading the formation of a new local auxiliary. She can be reached by e-mail at [victoriadelahay@yahoo.com](mailto:victoriadelahay@yahoo.com).*



# NorCal 39 Brings “The Great Pumpkin” to Halloween



The families of Stockton, California Auxiliary 39 teamed up with Operation Lifesaver to attend a “Trunk or Treat” event at a local elementary school during the Halloween holiday to teach children about the dangers of playing near the tracks. To teach kids to stay off railroad tracks, Jennifer Ballentine created a maze of tracks that each child had to go through to get their treat. The auxiliary members handed out candy, and each child also received a bag full of informational goodies from Operation Lifesaver. Each bag contained a coloring book, crayons, and an engineer’s hat, as well as a bright orange frisbee. Over 400 bags were handed out in one night.

A few days later, the auxiliary was asked to bring the Great Pumpkin to a harvest festival at another local school where 75 kindergarten students got to walk through the maze, ask questions, and get their bag full of goodies. Teachers and administrators also came out to admire the bright orange engine.

Auxiliary members had a great time teaching the children the dangers of playing near the railroad in a fun environment. Nor Cal 39 plans to make this a yearly event.





Jessica Cole

## LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

BY JESSICA COLE, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATIVE, AND

BECKY SCHNEIDER, ASSISTANT NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATIVE



Becky Schneider

### JESSICA'S UPDATE:

#### Federal Lawsuit Filed in Texas to Push One-Person Crew

Plaintiffs Union Pacific, Norfolk Southern, Burlington Northern Santa Fe, CSX, and several smaller railroads filed a suit in Federal Court for the Northern District of Texas, Fort Worth Division, against the Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers Union (SMART) in early October in an effort to compel the union to negotiate on the issue of one-person crews in upcoming contract negotiations scheduled to begin in November.

This renewed push for collective bargaining of minimum crew sizes comes even as the industry pushes for more and more freight capacity and longer and longer trains. The railroads contend that Positive Train Control (PTC) will make one-person crews as safe as two-person crews, but excessively long trains are increasingly experiencing technology breakdowns that PTC can't counter.

Congress has taken up the issue of minimum crew size with the Safe Freight Act, H.R. 1748, in the House of Representatives, and in the Senate with its companion bill S. 1979. Members are encouraged to continue to call and write their Representatives and Senators to promote co-sponsorship if they are not already doing so. As Jeremy Ferguson, President of the SMART Transportation Division, says regarding this most recent salvo in Federal court, "This latest attempt is nothing new, and it will once again be met with a vigorous defense."

Sources: *wtop.com*; *BLET Newsflash*

#### Cyber Terrorism as it Relates to Two-Person Crews

As reported by Becky in our last Newsletter, cyber terrorism is "truly an existential threat to our society." Rail networks have avoided specific cyber security regulations because lawmakers are more focused on high profile accidents than the vulnerabil-

ity of PTC and other computer-based technologies, whether from terrorists or malicious domestic hackers. PTC and Precision Scheduled Railroading have some resistance against such attacks, but no defense systems are foolproof. The U.S., Asia, and Europe have already experienced incidences of cyber attacks.

The layers of human responsibility in cybersecurity must be considered essential. Not only does this mean rail crews, ground crews, and administrative employees, it also means everyone who has a hand in developing cyber security safeguards or installing and maintaining computerized technology.

The threat of cyber attack is perhaps one of the most compelling arguments for mandating nationwide two-person crews. Today's trains are controlled or tracked by computer systems. Task overload from these systems provides a significant distraction to every operating crew member. One person managing and maintaining the integrity of a two-to three-mile freight train is tough enough. While technology can help, if it fails because of software failures or cyber attacks, the only crew member remaining would more than likely not be able to maintain the train. With time, operating crews may even lose some of those "old school" train handling skills that would enable them to bring the train to a halt safely in the event of a system failure. The conductor is not obsolete, and no amount of technology will ever make it so. Technology cannot replace a knuckle or investigate an incident involving the train because no crew member can be in two places at once.

Sources: *Railway Age*; *Trains Magazine*; *Dennis Pierce Congressional Testimony*

#### States Seek More Control Over Crude Oil Trains

In response to the pathetic oversight by the Environmental Protection

Agency, and the removal of "unnecessary barriers" in lieu of "voluntary guidance" by the FRA, Attorneys General for California, Maryland, New Jersey, and New York have sent letters of support to the U.S. Pipeline, and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) of the Washington State law that would limit volatility levels of oil transported by train.

The science behind the Washington law is that oil containing more natural gas liquids like butane and propane will have higher vapor pressure and, therefore, higher volatility. The fight over the volatility of North Dakota's Bakken oil is about money, not science. To stabilize the crude oil, the volatile natural gas liquids need to be removed, which devalues the crude immensely. So, what makes the crude safer to ship by rail also brings down its value. Most oil currently shipped by rail has a pressure of 9.0 to 10 pounds per square inch (psi). While oil trains are usually relatively safe, a derailment or spill changes all of this, and the risk of explosion creates the potential for tremendous loss of life and billions in property damage.

The PHMSA issued a proposed rule for a national vapor pressure standard of 9.0 psi in the last days of the Obama Administration, but, based on the DOT's current climate, the agency will likely withdraw any national vapor pressure regulation, and, as they did with the two-person crew rule, claim that the federal action preempts Washington State law on the issue.

In August, North Dakota used a study done by Sandia National Laboratories, that examined the flammable properties of three types of oil, including Bakken crude, to bolster the case with federal regulators, saying it was no more volatile than any other type of oil. Unfortunately, the sample used by Sandia had vapor pressures between 9 and 10.2 psi — pressures, similar to other crude oils that are less volatile (but not inert). The upside of the Sandia study is that its sample

was just above Washington State's proposed limit of 9.0 psi. Therefore, its conclusions support the state's push to require lower vapor pressure.

The Attorneys General letter points out that derailments of Bakken oil trains resulting in fires and explosions involved oil with vapor pressure much higher than 9.0 psi. Mount Carbon, WV, was 13.9 psi, and Lynchburg, VA, was over 14 psi. The one derailment in Culbertson, MT that resulted in a massive spill, but no fire, tested at 8.73 to 9.23 psi.

California Attorney General Xavier Becerra said, "States play an important role in protecting the health and safety of their citizens. Millions of Californians live, work, and attend school within the vicinity of railroad tracks. We can't afford to wait for the next disaster before taking action on the transport of dangerous and flammable oil moving through our communities. A derailment or explosion in California could put countless lives at risk and cause major damage to our land and waterways. This risk is simply unacceptable."

Ramanan Krishnamoorti, a petroleum engineering professor at the University of Houston, said in 2015 that "the notion that this requires significant research and development is a bunch of BS." He went on to say that, "the science behind this has been revealed over 80 years ago, and developing a simple spreadsheet to calculate risk based on composition and vapor pressure is trivial. It can be done today."

The upcoming legal battles will pit science and states' rights against the claim of preemption by the federal government. Oil industry supporters in North Dakota will continue to cast doubt on the science and push the administration to overrule state safety regulations focused on protecting communities. As State Representative Andy Billig (D-Spokane) put it, "If the federal government doesn't act to protect public safety and adopt a safer national standard, we will adopt

our own. There is just too much to lose – for people and our environment.”

Source: *rtands.com*; *DeSmogblog.com*

### **Protection of American Jobs in Cross-Border Rail Operations With Mexico Act**

A bi-partisan bill, H.R. 3896, the “Protection of American Jobs in Cross-Border Rail Operations with Mexico Act,” requiring that crews operating in the United States be operated by United States citizens, was introduced in the House on July 23, 2019, by Daniel Lipinski (D-IL) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA). On October 21, 2019, Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) introduced a companion bill of the same name, S. 2652.

Mexican crews employed by a subcontractor to Kansas City Southern’s Mexican subsidiary are allowed to routinely run 10 miles into the United States before being relieved by U.S. crews. These Mexican crews are not subject to the same FRA regulatory, training and testing requirements as U.S. crews. The Trump administration has turned a blind eye to this issue in spite of its rigorous public stance on border security and protecting American jobs. KCS’s stated reasoning is that replacing American workers saves time and money, but, as reported in President Pierce’s recent Congressional testimony, that is not true. The BLET has tried to work with KCS to reduce or eliminate any delays caused by a crew change at the border. The cause of the delays has to do with Customs and Border Patrol’s screening system.

Please call or write your Congressional representative to make known your support for H.R. 3896 in the House, and your Senators referencing S. 2652, both entitled the Protection of American Jobs in Cross-Border Rail Operations with Mexico Act. If possible, request their respective co-sponsorship of these bills.

Source: *BLET Newsflash*; *Dennis Pierce Congressional Testimony*

### **U.S.-Mexico Trade Agreements – NAFTA and USMCA**

The current U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) that has been proposed by the Administration to replace NAFTA, which was negotiated 25 years ago, still

leaves U.S. rail workers on an uneven playing field compared to their Mexican counterparts. As reported in our last newsletter, President Trump has been contacted to request inclusion in NAFTA 2.0 that trains originating in Mexico and operating in the U.S. be operated by U.S. Nationals since Mexico has had a law to that same effect dating back to 1931, which was included in the original NAFTA and is scheduled to be retained in the USMCA. No response to the request was received from the White House.

The disparity between U.S. and Mexico freight rail workers and the failure of the current administration to remedy it makes the need for passage of H.R. 3896 and S. 2652, described in the above section, all the more necessary. Again, please call or write to your representatives.

Source: *BLET Newsflash*; *SMARTTD*

### **Rail Chiefs Announce the formation of Coordinated Bargaining Coalition**

On November 1, 2010, top leaders of 10 rail unions announced that their organizations will be participating in coordinated bargaining in the round of national negotiations. The unions comprising the Coordinated Bargaining Coalition are: American Train Dispatchers Association (ATDA); Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen/Teamsters Rail Conference (BLET); Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen (BRS); International Association of Machinists (IAM); International Brotherhood of Boilermakers (IBB); National Conference of Firemen & Oilers/SEIU (NCFO); International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW); Transport Workers Union of America (TWU); Transportation Communications Union/IAM (TCU); Transportation Division of the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers (SMART-TD).

The following statement was jointly issued by ATDA President Leo McCann; BLET National President Dennis Pierce; BRS President Jerry Boles; IAM General Vice President–Transportation Sito Pantoja, IBB Director of Railroad Lodge Services John Mansker; IBEW Railroad Department Director Bill Bohne; NCFO President John Thacker; SMART-TD President Jeremy Ferguson; TWU Railroad Division Director John Feltz; and TCU National President Bob Scardelletti:

“We are pleased to announce the creation of the Coordinated Bargaining Coalition as we are on the threshold of the most critical round of national bargaining in a generation. Our Coalition is founded on two key values that we all share. One is that we understand the importance of each union’s autonomy to pursue membership-specific goals within a framework of broad solidarity to defend and improve the wages, benefits, and working conditions of our members. The other is that we will spare no effort to defeat the attack by the railroads on the very foundation of our members’ economic security.”

Jointly, the Coordinated Bargaining Coalition unions represent more than 105,000 railroad workers covered by the various organizations’ national agreements and comprise over 80% of the workforce that will be impacted by this round of negotiations.

Source: *BLET Newsflash*

### **Representation Rights Dwindling for Rail and Aviation Employees – BLET part of Union Group Suing to Overturn New NMB Rule Change**

A BLET Newsflash issued October 22, 2019, advised that the BLET, along with 14 other unions and union groups representing railroad and airline workers, has filed a joint lawsuit to protect workers covered by the Railway Labor Act (RLA) from an anti-union rule change recently implemented by a majority of the National Mediation Board (NMB). The suit was filed with the U. S. District Court for the District of Columbia. The NMB issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on January 31, 2019, making it easier to decertify unions under the RLA. The new rule also doubled the amount of time a union must wait before it can apply to once again represent a group following decertification from one year to two years. The final rule was adopted by a 2-to-1 vote with the Final Rule issued July 26, 2019. The two votes in favor were appointees of the current Administration and the dissenting vote by a 2009 Obama Administration appointee.

The lawsuit states, “The Board’s final Rule allowing a direct decertification application, election, and the two-year bar on applications following such an election are unjustified repudiations

of eight decades of past practice under the Act, contrary to the statutory language and legislative history, and are without factual basis or adequate justification. The Final Rule is arbitrary, capricious, and an abuse of discretion.”

President Pierce said that “the NMB’s Final Rule is contrary to 80-plus years of established practice. It is unfair, unnecessary, and is harmful to the stability of the airline and railroad industry because it undermines the balance of labor-management relations.”

The lawsuit asks the court to declare the NMB’s final rule invalid because it exceeds the Board’s statutory authority under, and is contrary to, the Railway Labor Act, and not in accordance with the law. The lawsuit also requests that the court issue preliminary and permanent injunctions to keep the NMB from implementing the Final Rule.

“The NMB’s rule is an attempt by government officials to hand even more power to corporations at the expense of working people,” TTD President Larry Willis said after the NMB vote. “Not only is this rule unnecessary, but it is ill-timed and tone-deaf to the needs of aviation and rail workers, who face unprecedented pressure from industry giants.

“A union contract is the most effective tool workers have to make life better for themselves and their families. Yet, the two Republican board members supporting this decision just made it easier to decertify unions in the rail and aviation sectors and bar employees from being able to vote for union representation for two years after decertification.”

Sources: *BLET Newsflash*; *AFL-CIO Transportation Trades Division*; *SMARTTD*

### **Downsizing, Closing, Displacing, and Reducing—PSR Leaves Its Mark**

Precision Scheduled Railroad (PSR) has had a meteoric rise in the past two years. It has been hailed by the railroads as the answer to better efficiency in the use of company assets (and when they say asset, they are counting everything from each car to each employee, seeking to maximize dollars of profit per asset).

— continued on Page 13



## Will You Help Me?

*by Matthew Parker, Chairman, BLET Nevada State Legislative Board*

What labor in America needs, now more than ever, is a President and a Congress possessing the fortitude to make necessary changes to the National Labor Relations Act and the Railway Labor Act that will give back to workers their voice and power as a means of both countervailing overwhelming corporate influence in politics and addressing income inequality.

This was the conclusion I came to after reading a book published this summer entitled, "Beaten Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor," by Steven Greenhouse. In this book, Mr. Greenhouse provides an excellent walk-through of the ups and downs of the American labor movement through the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st.

As Mr. Greenhouse recalls the demeaning losses labor suffered in the later years of the 20th century, the details he provides of recent actions demonstrate hope for a resurgence of the labor movement in coming years. From the 1993 formation of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), which advanced both the labor and progressive movements while also giving area labor unions a firm voice in governance, to the success in raising wages brought by the Fight for 15, and most recently the successes of teachers' strikes, including those in some of the most conservative regions of this nation which led to much-improved contracts for those educating our children, a labor movement that for years was regressing is now showing signs of resuming forward progress.

We are at a turning point in America right now where the potential exists for the rules of our economy in the future to be largely steered by those of us who work hard to support ourselves and our families. For this

result to be achieved, however, will require a large amount of activism. The changes we need to secure our future as workers will come only if we join together in a loud, collective voice to ensure that we are heard and acknowledged.

My experience as Chairman of the BLET Nevada State Legislative Board indicates that most Brothers and Sisters within our organization do not grasp why political activism is necessary. It seems to me the prevailing attitude is that showing up for political rallies, campaign walks, and Legislative hearings is not important and won't make a difference. As our organization's primary political activist in Nevada, however, I have seen how effective activism is.

When an anti-labor majority in both houses of the Nevada Legislature went on an unprecedented attack against the working people of our state in 2015, rallies on the Capitol plaza and weekend canvasses of neighborhoods targeting union members in the districts of legislators supporting anti-worker legislation were effective in stalling or significantly watering down much of this legislation. In the last two election cycles, I have had the good fortune of being called upon to do "lost time" work on behalf of the BLET and Teamsters. For those not familiar with this work, this is where we take leaves from our jobs on the rails to work full-time/temporary for the union, striving toward mobilizing members to get out and vote while also informing them as to which candidates support pro-worker issues. Done right, it is hard work; in the weeks immediately proceeding the 2018 election, I worked 29 days straight (taking only one day off for illness), with some of these days being performed voluntarily as they were outside the scope of work done directly for our union.

Some of these days began at 3:30 in the morning, standing outside of worksites in 23 degree weather talking with members coming on shift, and lasted until 9:30 at night. The results of this hard work are undeniable. The fact that in 2016 we won back the Nevada Legislature for a labor-friendly majority and then, in 2018, increased that majority while sweeping every state constitutional office except one for our labor-friendly candidates was not just happenstance; rather, it was, in part, the result of a massive mobilization campaign including all Nevada unions affiliated under the Nevada State Federation of AFL-CIO.

A prime example of the result of activism exists in the Nevada Assembly district where I reside. Here, I am represented by Brother Skip Daly, Business Agent for LIUNA Local 169 in Reno, a Democrat elected in a predominantly Republican district. In 2014, Brother Daly lost his re-election bid to a Republican challenger who was largely unfavorable to pro-labor issues. In 2016, when 31,549 votes were cast in this district, he won back this seat by 38 votes (an example of how every vote counts). In what turned out to be a shrewd move during the 2018 campaign, the organizers of the Nevada AFL-CIO's northern Nevada walk program sent all of those who showed up for their weekend labor walks in the final weeks before the election to canvass exclusively in this district. As a result, Brother Daly's winning margin in this election increased to 1,105 votes. As an additional example, the appreciation personally expressed to me by gubernatorial candidate Steve Sisolak as he showed up to rally the troops at two of these walks, seeing myself and Brother Mark Shumar of the Teamsters at the front of the line with clipboards in hand ready to go out and hit the streets pushing for his election, left me with no doubt that he would stand by the pledge he gave

me in 2017 to sign a two-person crew bill, which he did on May 15 of this year as our newly-elected Governor.

Activism works, but only when Brothers and Sisters turn out in response to calls for their assistance. I have attended many rallies opposing anti-labor legislation and participated in neighborhood canvasses supporting labor-friendly candidates. I have met many fine Brothers and Sisters from our Teamster locals as well as from the sheet metal side of SMART at these events, but missing are fellow rail workers. I am encouraged, however, that a number of my Brothers from my home Division (158), along with some from SMART-TD Local 1043, joined in efforts to show solidarity with GM workers in our community during their recent strike by turning out to walk the picket line with them. In another act of solidarity spearheaded by my Division L/R and First Vice Chairman, I and six other BLET Brothers contributed to pay a significant living expense for one of the striking GM workers facing financial hardship due to the strike.

Perhaps more so today than at any other time since the early 1970s, we as workers are poised to regain a voice in government for working people and restore prosperity to the working class. As BLET Vice President and National Legislative Rep. John Tolman said in his rousing speech at our Fourth National Convention, "We're on the march. We're on the rise, Brothers and Sisters." Our collective action is the key to shaping a future of success for us as workers, and that means more than just a few of us doing the work while the rest sit on the sidelines. We **CAN** steer the changes necessary in our government and the economy to secure a prosperous future for ourselves and our families, but doing so requires a commitment from all within the BLET and the BLET Auxiliary to be involved. Will you help me?





**Becky and Larry Schneider**

When my husband Larry retired seven years ago, I thought the day would never come when I would actually be able to do the same. We made a deal when I ran for National President in 2006, that I would quit my job during my tenure, and when my term was up, he would retire and I would go back to work. Sounded like a perfect plan. The big drawback, of which we were aware, is that I would only be 57 when he went on Medicare, leaving me without health insurance for eight years. At least while I was working, I was covered by our group insurance, which was far inferior to what we had on the railroad, but it was better than nothing.

Surprise, that 60-year mile marker snuck up on me and at last year's Eastern Regional Convention in Washington, D.C., I took my important documents and visited the Railroad Retirement table the very day I turned 60. A field agent verified my documents and called her office to get some numbers for me. I still wasn't sure exactly when my retirement date would be because of the insurance thing, but I knew I was ready.

Later that day, the Railroad Retirement reps gave me my numbers, both working and full retirement, and lo and behold, it turns out

# Who Knew?

## Retirement Rocks!

*By Becky Schneider, 3rd Vice President/Assistant NLR*

that since Larry had the age and years of service for full retirement, I could go ahead and file to receive a portion of my annuity while I was still working. Who knew! Just because I wasn't actually retired, it sure didn't make any sense to leave the partial annuity on the table, so I went for it... one of the best birthdays I've ever had! After returning to El Paso, I was able to get in touch with the Albuquerque field office and complete my application over the phone. My first partial annuity check was deposited into my bank account on October 1st, beginning my road to full retirement. The smoothness of the process could not have been accomplished if I hadn't actually talked to the Railroad Retirement rep face-to-face at the convention.

I finally "pulled the pin" at the end of January of this year, and, thanks to the Chicago rep I met in D.C. (whose card I had kept), she was able to expedite the processing of my "cease work" notice. The closest field office to El Paso is four hours away and I know others in the country may be even further. In-person contacts beat out the toll-free contacts almost every time, which is why I offer the alternative of meeting with the reps at regional conventions. These conventions are, in and of themselves, fun, and you get to meet brothers and sisters you wouldn't otherwise encounter. Also, having access to the vendors present, is invaluable. Not only does Railroad Retirement have representatives available, the health insurance representatives are also available for questions on what to do if you are in between losing the bridge insurance and going on Medicare, as well as other insurance options.

The only bump in the road occurred during one of my calls to the toll-free number. I was advised that it would be three months before I received my full annuity even though I stated several times I was already receiving a partial annuity. Again, I was so glad I had

the business card of someone who had met me, and who I could contact via e-mail. When I advised her of my recent call, she put me in contact with someone who expedited the change in status, and within a week I had the remainder of my full annuity for February. They rocked!

A last piece of advice the representative gave me was, based on my social security earnings to date, I should check into which would be greater when I reached full retirement age (66 yrs, 8 mos), Railroad Retirement Tier I or Social Security. If Social Security was greater, then I could switch over to collecting Social Security, but would still receive my Tier II benefits. Bottom line, you don't necessarily have to wait to start the next chapter of your life!

In sharing this story, I hope others who are not sure how to proceed may benefit. This is definitely one avenue that works. As of this writing, I have been retired ten months, but I'm still waiting to feel like I'm actually retired. Because of chores I put off, my duties as the Assistant NLR for the National Auxiliary, my Mom's 90th birthday celebration, and volunteering at the Church, I'm still very busy. But not having to go in to work every day has been great! My former employer, Sun Travel, threw a retirement luncheon for me, which was really sweet, and some of my colleagues (in their 70s and 80s!) asked what I would do with myself if I wasn't working. I assured them that sitting on the couch, eating bon bons and watching soap operas wasn't in my cards, and I seem to continue to get new volunteer jobs. When they asked if Larry and I would get in each other's way, I let them know we had already practiced so it was all good. So far, it's been great and I see no reason for it not to continue as such. The passports have been renewed and we're ready for the adventures to continue. So I say to you — Retirement Rocks!

## Pacific Northwest BLET Family in Crisis

Continued from Cover page



where they knew they had a support system.

At 30 days old, lying in Erin's arms and holding Daylen's hand, Hunter took his last breath on April 12, 2017. Daylen and Erin couldn't understand why this had happened to their perfect little family. They questioned Hunter's doctors, who assured them Hunter had a rare form of cardiomyopathy. The doctors went on to tell Daylen and Erin that they would have better luck winning the lottery than for this to ever happen to them again. With heavy hearts, they said goodbye to their precious baby boy with the extra big heart.

In January 2019, Daylen and Erin found out they were expecting again. Another boy brought both excitement and fear to their hearts. They did every test available to make sure their baby was okay. At 28 weeks, their fears overtook their excitement when they found baby Forrest had the same heart and brain defects as his big brother Hunter. Their world was again crushed and they were completely devastated. Doctors - four of them to be exact - advised

Daylen and Erin that they could choose to abort their baby boy. However, they both knew in their hearts that they had to meet their son.

Over the next months, they spent their free time going to appointments and monitoring Forrest's development. The news was always the same. Daylen and Erin kept praying for a miracle, asking God to not put them through yet another loss of a child.

At 37 weeks, Erin traveled to Portland to be closer to the Maternal Fetal Medical Team at OHSU, who continued to monitor Forrest in utero. On October 14, four days after Daylen and sister Lilliana joined Erin and settled into the Ronald McDonald house, Forest Stanley Kapon Lake was born. He weighed 9 lbs, 2 oz, and was 20.5 inches long. Right after his birth, the medical team rushed him out to a room called the recess room as he needed help breathing. He was fitted with a CPAP machine and his breathing steadied for almost a week. Multiple X-rays were taken to figure out the cause of his labored breathing.

He was diagnosed with a condition called Lobar Emphysema. Air could enter into his lungs but would not escape, causing over-inflation. Forrest underwent surgery and was put on life support for about a week. Although he recovered after two weeks, at the time of this writing, Forrest is still breathing harder than normal. The medical team thinks it is because Forrest is still working on building up his lungs. He has had

more echocardiograms on his heart, which all show it to be stable, but the medical team still won't know what the next steps are in Forrest's care until his breathing becomes normal. Though he is doing well, he still has heart issues and will eventually need a heart transplant.

Forrest's medical issues are not the only hardship the Lake family has endured. On a November 18 Facebook entry, Daylen posted the following about his fraternal grandfather: "My 'Gampa' Johnnie Murl Lake gained his wings last night around 10:15. He lived a blessed long life and was a hero to us all. I'm so thankful to have spent the time I did with him over these last few weeks and I'll never forget that last Cowboys game against the Giants. I know he's at peace now, especially since my son Hunter was up there greeting him with open arms. And I'm sure they're all keeping an eye on Forrest."

Our BLET family is hurting and need us. They have a long journey ahead at OHSU and their future is uncertain. Daylen has taken leave at work, but with the bills piling up, Erin fears she will soon be left alone as he returns to the rails to make ends meet. When asked how we can best help, Erin says, "Bills don't care you have a son in NICU. We have been barely scraping by with our parents' help this past month. But our funds are quickly depleting. Daylen needs to go back. But I need him here; it's tough." On top of that, they bought a house in 2018 and were deceived about its condition. They have 20 thousand dollars in dry rot issues that they thought had been fixed before purchase.

BLET Division 842 member Christopher Myron wrote in a statement: "Daylen is one of the nicest, caring people I know. I have known him for 13 years. . . and have seen him experience highs in his life, from his marriage to Erin and the birth of his daughter, to the lows in losing his son, Hunter. It was during this low in his life that his true character showed through. Although completely broken, he never gave up being a positive encouragement to those around him, grateful for those that supported his family, and full of love in the short time he was able to spend with Hunter. He always has a smile on his face and welcomes friendly conversation, even when life seems at times unfair. His joy in life is contagious. He and his family need our support now. I encourage anyone . . . who has been touched by their story to support them in any way they can."

Many thanks to Yellow City Family Auxiliary in Amarillo, Texas, and Twin Ports Auxiliary in Duluth, Minnesota, for the care packages both put together and sent to the Lake family. The family keeps everyone updated on their Facebook page called "Fighting for Forrest," where you can also find links and an address to donate directly to the family. BLET Pacific Northwest Auxiliary #503 is taking donations for the Lake family through Venmo, @PacificNorthwest-BLETAuxiliary. You can also e-mail Local Auxiliary President Jessica Keene at [jessica.keene.bletauxiliary@gmail.com](mailto:jessica.keene.bletauxiliary@gmail.com) with any questions or inquiries.

*Photo Credits: Professional Photographer Sarah Morace.*





## ***THE NATIONAL BLET AUXILIARY WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING SUPPORTERS***

*BLET National President Dennis Pierce and  
the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen*

*Andy and Ed Haley of Cornerstone Assurance*

*Jessie Taylor and the Brotherhood's Relief & Compensation Fund*

*Phil Sullivan and the North American Railway Foundation*

*Susan Tukel and Locomotive Engineers & Conductors Mutual Protection Association*

*Sherry Schirripa from American Time*

*The National Association of State Legislative Board Chairmen and the State Legislative  
Boards of Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Wyoming, Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Missouri*

*James and Janet Louis*

*Schlichter, Bogard & Denton Law Firm*

*Chod Law Firm*

Without the generous support of the people and organizations like you, none of this would be possible!



**North American  
Railway Foundation®**

*founded by the BR&CF*



Many thanks to the North American Railway Foundation (NARF) for sponsoring our newsletter and making it possible to share educational articles and information with our members across the nation, to keep railroad spouses and their families up-to-date on changes affecting benefits, and to educate our members about important legislation that helps promote safety on the nation's railroads.

The North American Railway Foundation, founded by the Brotherhood's Relief and Compensation Fund (BR&CF), was formed on October 22, 1996, as a nonprofit organization (a private operating foundation). Its purpose is to explore, nurture and support railway safety, efficiency, and technology, and to educate about and preserve the history of railroads in the United States and Canada. The goals of the Foundation are achieved by providing direct and active financial support to deserving non-profit institutions and projects, which exemplify the Foundation's purpose.

The Brotherhood's Relief and Compensation Fund, a non-profit corporation established in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, was founded on June 12, 1912, by Luther G. Smith, a locomotive engineer for the Pennsylvania Railroad, to provide job income protection to railroaders throughout the United States and Canada who were "held out of service" due to suspension or dismissal. Brother Smith did not object to the railroads using a method to discipline employees when such discipline was necessary, but he did not see the logic in innocent family members having to suffer when the head of the home made an error in the performance of his duties that resulted in a suspension or dismissal.

---

### **North American Railway Foundation**

**Philip J. Sullivan II, Executive Director**

**300 Sterling Parkway, Suite 105**

**Mechanicsburg, PA 17050**

**(717) 695-0284, [narf2216@gmail.com](mailto:narf2216@gmail.com)**

### **Brotherhood's Relief & Compensation Fund**

**Jesse E. Taylor, International President**

**300 Sterling Parkway, Suite 105**

**Mechanicsburg, PA 17050**

**(717) 657-1890**

# Tidbits from National Secretary Lawana Poss

It's time for winter weather and holidays! I wish you all a wonderful, relaxing, and stress-free Christmas! Another New Year is around the corner and I wish for everyone a prosperous and healthy one!

If you would like to view our newsletter online instead of having it mailed to you...**GO GREEN!** Just let me know of your preference!

## WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS!

Auxiliary 99 Yellow City Bomb Squad- Amarillo, Texas!

Victoria Delahay, Octavia Garcia, Shannon Denney, Michelle Labrier, Cindy Backus, Michelle Klumb, Krista Blair, Courtney Erwin, Pam Winbolt, and Jessica Tatum.

## CARE AND ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Please check to see if someone in your Auxiliary may be eligible and encourage them to apply. Members-at-large are eligible also! Please contact me for applications!

## MEMBERS-AT-LARGE

Dues notices will be mailed soon. Please make sure to update your information. I should receive all dues payments by March 1, 2020.

## AUXILIARY SECRETARIES

You will receive your Auxiliary Packets soon. Please have your packet in my office BEFORE March 1, 2020. If you have any questions about the forms, please call or e-mail me. I will be more than happy to assist you in getting these forms properly filled out and processed.

## SCHOLARSHIP NEWS

If you have children who are college-bound, they may be eligible to apply for a BLET Auxiliary Scholarship. Information, instructions, and applications can be obtained on our website at [www.bletauxiliary.net](http://www.bletauxiliary.net). You can also find a link from the BLET website at [www.blet.org](http://www.blet.org) under "Departments," then "BLET

Auxiliary." Scholarship applications for the 2019-2020 academic school year, are due in my office on or before April 1, 2019. Late applications will not be considered. Please read ALL instructions! Changes have been made to the application and eligibility.

## OUR DEEPEST SYMPATHIES

Charlotte McConnell, mother of our National President Kathleen Bisbikis, passed away on December 3. Our deepest heartfelt sympathies to Kathleen and her family.

Mike Poss, Member at Large - Georgia, lost his mother, Ruth Poss, on October 27. Mike also lost his longtime friend and retired BLET Member Terry McFarland, who passed away November 4. Please keep Mike in your thoughts and prayers.

## GET WELL SOON!

Rose Surchik is recovering from back surgery. Rose is the President of Auxiliary 6388, Twinports, Proctor, Minnesota, and also the BLET Auxiliary Alternate National Secretary.

Gail Sanchez has been in the hospital with pneumonia and her husband, Oscar, has also been under the weather. Gail is a member of Auxiliary 417 in Springfield.

## CONGRATULATIONS!

Serena Kelling, member of Nor Cal Auxiliary 39 in Stockton, California, and her family welcomed a new baby boy. Hunter Kelling, was born on October 15! Happy grandparents, Fil and Jeanette Elle, and Aunt Lynette Sanchez, are also members of Nor Cal Auxiliary 39.

Please call or e-mail me or any national officer when there is a death of a member or the death of one of their family members. We want to be able to send our condolences to the family. We would like to also share in the joy! Please let me know of any exciting happenings!

I send warm wishes to you and your families for a beautiful Christmas and a safe, Happy New Year!



*Lawana Poss can be reached at 770-497-8898, or [Lewp2007@bellsouth.net](mailto:Lewp2007@bellsouth.net)*

*"I no longer listen to what people say, I just watch what they do. Behavior never lies."*

—Winston Churchill



## Legislative Update

Continued from Page 7

The railroads have promised that their customers would benefit as well, with quicker delivery of freight and cost efficiencies. Still, many companies that ship by rail are experiencing delays, higher costs, and frustrations.

In the meantime, PSR has now begun to have a significant impact on rail employees as well, with several large layoffs and yard closures already taking place, and rumors of many more on the way. Norfolk Southern has closed three eastern yards, and Union Pacific recently made headlines for closing the Neff Yard in Kansas City with almost no warning. Altogether these represent a loss of about 500 jobs.

Many have approached me expressing some confusion as to exactly what PSR entails. I have posted on The National BLET Auxiliary Facebook page a short summary by the AFL-CIO Transportation Trades Department, that provides a good overview of the different problems that are being caused by this relatively new model for moving trains. Please visit our Auxiliary's Facebook page, or you can access it at <https://ttd.org/policy/precision-scheduled-railroading-threatens-to-gut-america-s-freight-rail-system/>

SMART TD Kansas State Legislative Board Director Ty Dragoo, not willing to stay silent, made sure the general public had a chance to be informed on this issue with an excellent letter to the editor:

*"Dear Editor,  
America's railroads are going through a round of job cuts. But at what cost? We, the public, are paying for significant Wall Street gains while selling out our communities.*

*Union Pacific has announced the closure of Neff Yard in Kansas City. Now you get to hold the bag as UP takes the money to the bank.*

*Union Pacific Railroad's decision this week to abolish 200 positions at Neff Yard follows similar force reductions by the other major freight rail systems across the country.*

*The cuts aren't coming because the company is losing money: Union Pacific in July 2019 reported 2019 second-quarter net income of \$1.6 billion, or \$2.22 per diluted share. This compares to \$1.5 billion, or \$1.98 per diluted share, in the second quarter of 2018.*

*"We delivered record second-quarter financial results driven by exceptional operating performance, including an all-time best quarterly operating ratio of 59.6 percent," said Lance Fritz, Union Pacific chairman.*

*The cuts aren't due to burdensome corporate taxes. Union Pacific disclosed in 2017 the estimated impact from the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act in a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission. That disclosure saw some shocking amounts of money to the tune of \$6 billion.*

*The \$5.8 billion benefits come primarily from the revaluation of UP's deferred tax liabilities to reflect the new federal corporate tax rate of 21 percent.*

*Also, UP stated the tax break law would result in a \$200 million non-cash reduction to its operating expenses. It is also of note that many states and local communities have subsidized Union Pacific with tax money.*

*The most-significant financial boost was Union Pacific's much-lower tax bill for the reporting quarters. Operating income may have increased, which is impressive, knowing that workers are responsible for that. Still, the company's tax bill since passage has been substantially lower, which has led to a massive increase in net income for the quarters.*

*Despite taxpayer dollars and tax cuts helping Union Pacific gain more per-share for Wall Street, their way to say "thanks" seems to be, pack up and go. This is leaving behind an economic catastrophe for impacted communities to clean up for themselves. To add insult to injury, the company didn't even have the decency to warn employees until a few days out.*

*The cuts are due to insatiable corporate greed. Union Pacific is one of*

*the largest U.S. freight rail operators, with annual revenues of more than \$20 billion.*

*While communities struggle with basic needs, education, public utilities, streets, emergency services, food tax rates, sales tax, etc., all at the table for increase when UP wants its cut. You have been paying more while they cut and run. This is a double slap to the face, one we must be vocal about.*

*These job losses will ripple through the heart of the local economy. Without income and security, workers and families won't be able to spend on clothes, restaurants, recreation, and much more. Union Pacific isn't only undermining workers and families, but entire regional economies.*

*As we stand in solidarity with the Union Pacific workers who are about to lose their livelihoods, we can't forget that corporate decisions in faraway places leave deep scars in unsuspecting communities. Not only do workers in these communities deserve gratitude, but we must also hold companies who take them for granted accountable. When communities invest in companies, we are investing in jobs.*

*We kept our promise. Will Union Pacific and other railroads continue to break theirs?"*

*Sincerely,  
Ty Dragoo  
Kansas State Legislative Director — SMART TD*

*Source: SMART TD*

**Jessica Cole lives in Baraboo, Wisconsin. She can be reached at [jcts1987@gmail.com](mailto:jcts1987@gmail.com), or 262-672-9742.**

### BECKY'S UPDATE:

On October 22 and 23, nearly two dozen BLET officers lobbied members of Congress on the Mexican Cross-Border issue and the Safe Freight Act. Nineteen officers from state legislative boards and general committees from areas all over the country joined the BLET's Washington, D.C., office staff, Vice President/National Legislative Representative John Tolman, Director

of Political and Legislative Affairs Bob Hagan, and Director of Regulatory Affairs Vince Verna.

National President Dennis Pierce said, "Regardless of your political party of choice, I urge all BLET members to take a few minutes to call your members of Congress to voice your support for our position on these two critical issues. Please help us to protect our jobs, our craft, and our future." To find contact information for your Congressional Representatives, you can go to [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov) and click on the "members" tab.

*Source: BLET Newsflash*

### Amtrak News

**Budget** - On October 31, 2019, the Senate passed, by a vote of 84 to 9, a four-bill "minibus," which contained increased funding for Amtrak, as well as several policy riders designed to empower stakeholders to protect passenger rail service. An amendment to the bill was passed, which permanently bars the clawbacks of more than \$1 billion from the Mass Transit Account. The House and Senate bills can now proceed to a conference committee to hash out the differences between the two bills. If negotiations continue beyond November 21, another continuing resolution will need to be passed to avoid a partial government shutdown.

Most of the policy riders are great news for Amtrak, except for Food and Beverage Service, which is required to reduce its losses to zero by 2020 pursuant to what is commonly referred to as the "Mica provision."

Dining Car Service and jobs going the way of the Dodo – The ghost of Congressman John Mica (R-FL) continues to haunt Amtrak's food service options. In 2015, he sponsored, and Congress passed, a provision requiring Amtrak to eliminate all financial losses on the dining car service by the end of 2020. For now, all dining car service on long-distance trains east of the Mississippi is gone, except for the Auto Train. Dining car service is being replaced with "contemporary dining" and a new "Enhanced Flexible Dining Menu." Amtrak attributes the changes to millennials, some of whom prefer that over shared table seating in the

dining cars. The new dining option consists of pre-packaged meals, heated if necessary, and available only to sleeping car passengers for now. Many passengers have noted that this is not a viable alternative to freshly prepared meals, especially when the meals are not unwrapped, or even a tray provided to carry the "box lunch."

In the larger scheme of things, this doesn't sound like something worthy of reporting. Still, many organizations believe that if the dining car option continued to be offered for a price to both first-class and coach passengers, it would remain another reason for taking the train. Many current riders have said they would pay more to have the dining car service available. The option could be one of three options offered to cater to the individual preferences of different passengers. It's not just about nostalgia; it is an amenity that distinguishes train travel from airlines or buses.

The other issue pertaining to food service on the train is that (a) provisions are not being made to ensure there is enough food for the passengers for the entire trip, and (b) no provisions are made for the possibility of the train being late. Running out of food on a train is a problem. It's not like you can run to the convenience store instead.

Lastly, many dining car attendants and chefs have worked those jobs for a very long time. Some are fortunate enough to be able to retire, and did so when the service was discontinued, but in this day and age, we need to preserve all union jobs whenever and wherever possible.

**On-Time Performance** – In a recent congressionally-mandated report, Amtrak's Office of Inspector General (OIG) sought to identify potential cost savings or revenue improvements associated with improved on-time performance (OTP). The OIG found a relationship between improved OTP, increased revenue, and decreased costs. The report states that making 75% of trains run on time could save Amtrak nearly \$42 million every year. Even improving OTP by 5% on all routes would result in \$12.1 million in financial benefits in the first year.

The OIG says that fixing OTP for the long term would do more than save on penalties. It also could help Am-

trak reduce labor costs by trimming pay penalties and reducing the need for stand-by staff, and fuel costs would decline due to less idling in sidings. Fewer missed connections would reduce payouts to passengers for hotels and food vouchers. Eliminating the need for extra crews and "protecting" equipment that the Carrier now maintains strictly to cope with poor OTP would save \$20.5 million a year and give Amtrak a one-time shot in the arm of \$336 million that could be used to support growth and new equipment.

In addition to all these benefits from OTP, ridership would likely increase if passengers could depend on the fact that they would reach their destination at or close to the time they were scheduled. One of the special riders passed in the budget expressed concern that protracted negotiations between Amtrak and Class I freight railroads have yet to be resolved, compromising safety and reducing customer satisfaction, leading to reduced ridership and increased reliance on federal subsidies. The most recent Amtrak Host Railroad Report Card for 2018 lays out in stark relief just how bad OTP is. CP is the only Class I receiving an A grade; BNSF, UP, and CSX received B and B-; CN received a D- and NS an F. Of the Long-Distance trains, only the Auto Train received a passing grade of 72%. The remaining 14 trains failed, with the highest rating being the Palmetto at 59% OTP and the OTP poster child Sunset Limited at 26%. This must change to give passengers a reliable option of train travel, increasing Amtrak's profitability, thereby reducing the need for federal subsidies. It was written into the Agreement that stood up Amtrak, and it needs to be enforced.

**Virgin Trains USA - Desert Xpress High-Speed Train** The California Infrastructure and Economic Development Bank (IBank) has given Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Trains the green light to float \$3.25 billion in development bonds to link Las Vegas, Nevada, and Victorville, California (northwest of LA). Virgin Trains will be able to start selling bonds as early as the first quarter of next year. Getting the funding in place quickly should let Virgin start work right away and clear

the way to start carrying passengers by 2023. In the short term, building the service will create nearly 16,000 construction jobs and, once completed, will provide at least 400 permanent jobs. Many believe that public-private partnerships are the wave of the future for passenger rail.

**Depot to Port – Orlando, FL, to Port Miami** The Miami-Dade County Commission has approved plans to build the Port Miami station, allowing residents and tourists to enjoy major destinations with ease. Virgin Trains President stated that "this is a first-of-its-kind train to a port station that will connect the cruise capital of the world with a car-free option for millions of cruisers."

*Source: Passenger Rail Association; Railway Age; Library of Congress*

### **Blocked Crossing? Talk to the Hand**

More and more incidents of grade crossings being blocked for hours are being reported all over the country. Not only are communities being inconvenienced with the extended delays, but these delays are also putting peoples' lives at risk when emergency services cannot use an alternate route, or one doesn't exist. There are a myriad of reasons given by the Carriers, including mechanical issues, rail traffic, and trains that are too long and don't fit into existing sidings. The real problem is the Carriers don't care, and there is not a lot anyone can do about it. The railroads pay the fines when they have to. Still, a recent ruling by a federal judge in Oklahoma has enjoined Edmond and Davis Oklahoma, along with the Oklahoma Corporation Commission, from enforcing the state's new blocked railroad crossing law. BNSF filed a lawsuit against tickets being issued for blocking intersections, arguing that federal law preempts state law.

Neighborhoods across the country only have one road for ingress and egress. If a train blocks the crossing for hours, that goes beyond inconvenience – it could put someone's life in peril. Even if someone died because

of the inability to access emergency services, the carriers would likely settle and move on. Sad to say, but the responses from at least two Class I railroads is, "Did the residents know the tracks were there when they moved in?" Of course, the answer is yes, but the possibility of being held a prisoner in their neighborhoods for hours probably wasn't a consideration since it shouldn't happen in the first place.

*Source: BLET Newsflash; Railway Age; Florence Alabama Times Daily*

### **LNG Trains**

As mentioned in our last newsletter, an Executive Order was issued in April to open up the transport of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) by railroad tank cars, with 100 or more per train, to ports for export. The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) and the FRA announced a proposed rule that would allow the rail industry to move LNG in cars currently used for other flammable gases super-cooled into liquid form. According to PHMSA, the derailment of a train full of LNG could have "high consequences," resulting in a major fire or explosion with a blast area of 3/4 of a mile. Public comment for the proposed rule ends December 23, 2019.

Assertions made as to the ability to safely transport LNG by rail cannot be made because the amounts currently being shipped are so small in comparison to what is being proposed. For example, in 2008, 9500 carloads of crude oil were moved by rail with no significant accidents or explosions. By 2014, nearly 500,000 carloads were moved by rail in a year, marked by several major accidents and explosions. High consequence outcomes are much more likely at the high volumes proposed. Crude oil is less likely a danger than LNG when it comes to the physical properties of the two materials with the potential scale of damage far higher than an oil train.

The PHMSA and FRA have proposed no new safety regulations to LNG trains – no limitation on length, requirement for electro-pneumatic brakes, or new speed limits in populated areas. Rail safety expert Fred Millar summed up what is happening, telling DeSmog, "this PHMSA/FRA



rulemaking is evidence of Big Oil/Gas hurriedly queuing up while the Trump Bank Window for Regulatory Withdrawals is wide open for business." Put more simply: profits first.

Source: DeSmogBlog.com

Correction: LNG has not been transported cross country by truck, only by train in small quantities. The original statement in our last newsletter was incorrect.

### Trains Hauling Water?

Lakeville Railroad Company is requesting permits to drill two wells in Dakota County, Minnesota, pulling 500 million gallons of groundwater a year. Their goal is to then ship the water via rail to communities near the Colorado River in the arid Southwest. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources is reviewing the unusual request for viability. Stay tuned.

Source: BLET Newsflash; St. Paul Pioneer Press

### Railroad Retirement News

**Increases and changes for 2020** – Annuitants will receive Cost of Living Adjustments (COLAs) beginning in January 2020 due to a rise in the Consumer Price Index (CPI). COLAs will be calculated for both Tier I and Tier II benefits. Tier I benefits, like Social Security, will increase by 1.6%, and Tier II benefits will increase by 0.5%. Vested and dual benefit payments and supplemental annuities are not adjusted for the change in the CPI. However, widow(er)s whose benefits are being paid under the RR Retirement Reform Act of 2001, do not receive annual COLAs until their annuity amount exceeds the amount that would have been paid under the law. The way this was explained to me after the Reform Act passed in 2001 was that because of COLA increases in

## Greetings from your Editor, Jodi Wallace

*"Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around."*

— Leo Buscaglia



Sisters and Brothers,

First, of all, I am so sorry for the error that appeared in the headline about the new Springfield Missouri auxiliary, on the front page of the last issue of this publication. The correct auxiliary number is 417, not 217. My apologies to our new local auxiliary in Springfield.

With the holiday season upon us, Rose Surchik, President of Twin Ports Auxiliary 3388 in Duluth, Wisconsin, has proposed a challenge to each of us. The challenge is in the form of a reverse Advent calendar, which can be found on our website or Facebook page. The idea is to gather all of the items on the list then take them to your local shelter on Christmas, or any time that works for you. You could actually do this at any time of year as shelters are always in a need of donations.

With all of the rails around the country who are or have been furloughed, you could choose to deliver the items to a family that has been directly affected by the furlough. You never know if that might make a difference in someone's life as to whether or not they have a meal that day.

We have added a new column to our newsletter. Starting with this issue, we will feature a guest columnist article, written by one of the BLET state legislative chairmen. I hope you will enjoy reading the article by Matthew Parker, Nevada State Legislative Board Chairman, on Page 8.

Wishing you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Jodi Wallace can be reached at 1-541-663-6966, [jodi\\_wallace@bletauxiliary.net](mailto:jodi_wallace@bletauxiliary.net), or by snail mail at 1804 Washington Ave., La Grande, Oregon, 97850.

We welcome your submissions for our publication. Please send your stories, articles, photos, poems, etc., to:

Jodi Wallace, Editor  
BLET Auxiliary News  
541-663-6966  
[jodi\\_wallace@bletauxiliary.net](mailto:jodi_wallace@bletauxiliary.net)

The next issue will be published in March 2020. Please have your submissions to Jodi on or before February 15, 2019.

We are proud to support the  
Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen

**CORNERSTONE**  
BENEFITS MANAGEMENT

**BENEFITS THAT PAY. IT'S HOW WE DO IT.**  
We provide the most comprehensive and affordable group insurance plans in the industry. A Cornerstone group plan helps further protect members from loss of income due to injury or illness.

**ADMINISTRATION. WE MAKE THINGS EASY!**  
We handle all aspects of the group administration. This includes premium payments, enrollment services, claims advocacy, administrative services and union support.

**CONSIDER THE FACTS. PROTECT YOUR FINANCIAL SECURITY.**  
Your income isn't just a paycheck; it is usually the primary source of funding for your life and your needs. Income protection provided by Cornerstone can go a long way to protect you and your family for years to come!



**DISABILITY ■ LIFE INSURANCE ■ ACCIDENT  
CRITICAL ILLNESS ■ RETIREE BENEFITS**

**CORNERSTONE BENEFITS MANAGEMENT**  
22333 CLASSIC COURT, LAKE BARRINGTON, IL 60010  
P: 847.387.3555 F: 815.425.5349  
[UNIONDISABILITY.COM](http://UNIONDISABILITY.COM) [INFO@UNIONDISABILITY.COM](mailto:INFO@UNIONDISABILITY.COM)

**ANDREW M. HALEY**  
PRESIDENT  
**EDWARD P. HALEY**  
NATIONAL DIRECTOR



## BLET Auxiliary

Sereena Hogan, Publisher, BLET Auxiliary News  
8720 N. Myrtle Drive  
Tucson, AZ 85704-3340

*Published at the above address regularly*

Nonprofit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Tucson, AZ  
Permit No. 2216

Return Service Requested

*Moving? Please notify us of your new address*

---

### Legislative Report, continued

the years prior to 2001 for long-time widow(er)s, the amount of their annuity exceeded what they would be paid under the new formula in the Act. Eventually, those beneficiaries will catch up to the point that they will again start receiving annual COLA increases. The Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) will mail notices to all annuitants providing a breakdown of the annuity rates payable to them in January.

**Retiree Earning Limits** – The earnings limit for those who have not attained full Social Security retirement age in 2020 rises to \$18,240 per year, up from \$17,640 in 2019. If an annuitant exceeds the limit, there is a benefits deduction of \$1 for every \$2 of earnings over the exempt limit. Interest, dividends, certain rental income, or income from stocks, bonds, or other investments are not considered earnings for this purpose. For those receiving disability, the monthly earnings limit increased to \$990, up from \$950 in 2019.

**Unemployment and Sickness Benefits** – Unemployment and sickness benefits will be reduced by a lesser percentage than in previous years due to the new sequestration rate. When sequestration first took effect in 2013, they were subject to a 9.2% reduction. This year's reduction will be by a lesser percentage of 5.9%.

**Budget** – While 4 of the 10 pending appropriations bills passed the Senate, 6 of them are still stuck in the Senate, including HR 2740, which contains funding for the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB), in addition to several other agency budgets. On October 31, 2019, the third cloture vote failed by a vote of 51 to 41, with 8 not voting. Unless the Motion for Cloture receives 60 votes in the affirmative, the bill cannot proceed to the floor for an up or down vote. The House passed this appropriations bill by a vote of 226 to 203 on June 19, 2019.

On October 16, a joint letter from the American Association of Railroads (AAR) and the AFL-CIO Transportation Trades Department, Rail Labor Division (TTD-RLD) was sent to the Chairman and Ranking Member of the House Ap-

propriations Committee, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies. The letter urges passage of HR 2740, and while the joint effort of these two organizations is appreciated, the bill had already passed the House in June, but it could possibly be favorable for retaining funding levels in the House bill. The funding provided in the appropriations bill is vital to reduce further reduction in staffing levels and to bring the RRB's information technology systems into the 21st Century. Currently the RRB operates on a 40-year-old mainframe.

**Resources published in October** – The RRB has provided two question-and-answer documents, one containing information regarding credit for military service under the Railroad Retirement Act, and the other addressing Railroad Retirement annuities and pensions from work not covered by Railroad Retirement or Social Security. The first Q&A is self-explanatory. The second covers issues raised by those who may be subject to reduction when retired employees or spouses also collect certain public, non-profit, or foreign pension payments.

**RRB Financial Reports** – An additional Q&A was published in August pertaining to the health of our Railroad Retirement Trust Fund. The overall conclusion of the reports was that, "barring a sudden, unanticipated, significant decrease in railroad employment or substantial investment losses, the Railroad Retirement System would experience no cash flow problems for the next 25 years." If any dire circumstance occurs, the Reform Act of 2001 contained provisions which will trigger corrective action on Tier II taxes paid by employers and employees.

*Source: Railroad Retirement Board; Library of Congress*

Merry Christmas y'all, and best wishes for a prosperous New Year! Feliz Navidad y Nuevo Prospero Ano!

*Becky Schneider lives in El Paso, Texas. She can be reached at [beckybat@att.net](mailto:beckybat@att.net), or 915-581-1373.*

---