

# An Open Letter to All Rail Labor Union Officials

June 4th, 2019

As you know, the rail industry is in the throes of tumultuous changes, collectively known as “Precision Scheduled Railroad-ing” (PSR). As of late 2018, there is no major rail carrier that is immune from the convulsions that are taking place in our industry. This operating plan has been propelled into the forefront in recent years by the quest for short-term profits by hedge fund investors with no concern about the long-term viability nor health of the rail industry. While PSR might help to deliver record profits and all-time low operating ratios, this operating plan is in fact a farce, a thinly veiled disguise that relies on deferred maintenance, lax safety standards, a decline in infrastructure investment, and reduced labor/manpower costs to “succeed.” PSR has been problematic for rail workers of all crafts, shippers of all shipping groups, general rail safety, the industry itself and the nation as a whole. The profit-driven speed-up has contributed to worker fatalities and crippling injuries. Workers are vulnerable to even more hazards and dangers, as are surrounding communities.

Rail unions have a culture and history of bargaining over “wages, benefits and working conditions.” Traditionally, the unions have remained on the sidelines when the rail carriers implement the latest operating plan or practice deemed to be the “prerogative of management.” We must no longer take this approach. While PSR itself might technically be outside of the realm of the collective bargaining agreement, it is having a direct and detrimental effect upon our conditions of employment, upon our wages, benefits, retirement, safety and health, and working conditions. The union that fails to take a position – together with decisive action – in opposition to PSR, does so at its own risk of appearing weak and impotent in the eyes of its members.

This scourge on our industry has been well documented in the last few years, from the operating failures at CP and near melt-down at CSX, to the recent lack of fluidity on CN and the issues at newcomers to PSR - NS, KCS and UP - causing disruption and discontent among rail workers. In March, Dennis Pierce – President of one of the larger rail unions, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen (BLET) - stated that the financial goals behind this get-rich-quick gimmick “ ... reveal PSR for what it really is ... a scheme to suck up as much of the railroad’s revenues as possible and distribute it to investors, particularly to the hedge funds that own an ever-increasing stake in the industry ... At the same time, operational downsizing cuts are removing much more than “fat”; they cut into the muscle and bone of the operation and are much harder to repair when the hedge fund investors move on to greener pastures.”

As the voice of rail labor, the principle officers of the nation’s rail unions must not remain silent. Your members are looking to you for leadership and guidance in this difficult time. Failure to take a position on such an issue of grave concern to tens of thousands of railroad workers is an abrogation of your responsibility as union leaders. A failure on your part to take an active leadership role in building opposition to this operating plan - a curse upon your respective memberships - will render you obsolete and irrelevant going forward.

PSR affects all railroad workers, and as such, ironically offers the rail unions a golden opportunity to build the unity and solidarity among our unions and our rank & file that we so desperately need. In addition, the crisis of PSR offers us the opportunity to form alliances with environmental activists concerned about another profit-driven ecological disaster, along with communities who fear becoming the next Lac-Mégantic.

Railroad workers understand that PSR is a direct attack on us – a war being waged by the carriers – that affects employees of all carriers, in all crafts, and members of all unions. PSR stands to decimate our ranks, immiserate our work lives while wreaking havoc on our personal lives, degrade our working conditions, erode safety and health, and harm the industry that we have worked so hard to build up. The rank & file railroad workers of North America are fired up! They are ready for action. They are looking for leadership. They want *action*. RWU joins with them in their demand that their union leaders take bold and decisive action to defend our interests.