BLET members proud to work President George H.W. Bush funeral train
See pg 2 for more information

HISTORIC BUSH FUNERAL TRAIN
Train crew of the George H.W. Bush funeral train, from left: Locomotive engineer June Nobles (BLET Division 139), Conductor Billy Blanton, Locomotive engineer Aaron Braud (BLET Division 139), and Conductor Randy Kuhaneck. Sister Nobles operated UP locomotive 4141, which powered the Bush funeral train. Brother Braud operated UP locomotive 9069, which pulled a security train in advance of the funeral train.

SAVE THE DATE

2019 BLET regional meetings

The BLET National Division is pleased to announce the dates and locations of its 2019 regional meetings: June 24-28 in St. Louis, Missouri; and July 22-26 in Clearwater, Florida.

The St. Louis regional meeting will be held at the Hilton Hotel at the Ballpark and the Clearwater regional will be held at the Hilton Clearwater Beach.

As with previous regional meetings, the 2019 meetings will be arranged on a Monday through Friday schedule. Travel to the meeting, registration and a welcome reception for each of the two meetings will be on Monday (June 24 for St. Louis and July 22 for Clearwater). Meetings, training classes and other events will be scheduled throughout the remainder of the week and will include a closing dinner/dance on Thursday night. Travel home is on Friday for each meeting (June 28 for St. Louis and July 26 for Clearwater).

Per the BLET Bylaws, regional meetings are held “for the purposes of membership training, education and discussion of matters of importance to the membership.” Additionally, the meetings are structured to include options for fellowship with other members and their families, entertainment, fun and relaxation.

More specific details will be announced at a later date. Registration information will be available online at the BLET National Division’s regional meeting website (http://www.bletregionals.org). All members are encouraged to attend one or both of these regional meetings in 2019.

Apply Today
Hoffa Scholarship Fund accepting applications through March 2019, pg. 3

RRB News
Retiree earnings limits to rise in 2019 pg. 4

2018 Santa Train
BLET member Joe Barr helps Santa Claus on 76th annual run pg. 7

Register for News Flash email alerts at: www.ble-t.org/newsflash Follow us on Facebook: www.facebook.com/BLETNational
BLET members proud to work Bush funeral train

Members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen proudly worked as crew members aboard the special Union Pacific funeral train for President George H.W. Bush on December 6.

The two funeral trains were operated by BLET locomotive engineers. The first train — UP locomotive 4141 — was operated by June Nobles of BLET Division 139 (Houston, Texas). Her conductor was Randy Kuhaneck, a member of SMART TD Local 577 (Palestine, Texas). Like President Bush, Nobles and Kuhaneck are both Navy veterans. The train carried the casket and members of the Bush family from the funeral in Houston to President Bush’s final resting place in College Station, Texas.

The second train was operated by BLET locomotive engineer Aaron Braud, also of Division 139 (Houston, Texas). His conductor was Billy Blanton, also of SMART TD Local 577 (Palestine, Texas). Their train was a security train that traveled in advance of the Bush funeral train, making sure the infrastructure was sound and all security measures were in place.

BLET Division 139 Local Chairman Kevin DeArment said that Sister Nobles and Brother Braud are both highly regarded engineers on the territory. “It was a great honor for both,” Brother DeArment said. “I’ve had the pleasure of working with them over the years and they are a credit to our craft.”

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BLET EDITOR’S NOTE: This month, President Pierce wanted to dedicate this page to the train crew who operated the George H.W. Bush funeral train on December 6, 2018. His regular column will resume in the next issue of the Newsletter.
Some lawmakers in Ohio were up to their old tricks again just after Election Day when a hearing was held to discuss a so-called right-to-work (RTW) bill. But the Teamsters and other unions showed up and made it clear that the Buckeye State doesn’t need any more laws that infringe on the rights of workers.

While state Rep. John Becker (R) tried to peddle to the public that the legislation, known as HB 53, would only enshrine into state law the recent Janus v. AFSCME decision handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court in June, labor and pro-worker allies weren’t having any of it. Ohio, they noted, rejected RTW in a 2011 referendum vote, and there was no reason to consider the issue again.

Democrats on the House Finance Committee also pushed back on the bill, saying Becker was not being forthcoming on the true ramifications of the legislation. Among other things, the legislation would have made “an appropriation to be used by the State Employment Relations Board to pay the costs of developing, producing, and distributing written information explaining a public employee’s rights and options under the Public Employees Collective Bargaining Law.”

What that means is taxpayers would be doling out scarce public dollars to enforce union busting. That’s not a good use of precious funds and certainly goes beyond anything spelled out under Janus.

Efforts to impose RTW in Ohio have popped up several times in recent years, but thankfully haven’t gone anywhere. And it appears this latest attempt won’t either. Current Gov. John Kasich and incoming Gov. Mike DeWine said they don’t support such efforts, given voters’ rejection of the ballot measure seven years ago.

That said, unions must remain vigilant in fighting against such anti-union measures. Workers in RTW states have lower wages, higher poverty, less access to health care and poorer education for their children.

When will corporate crony lawmakers learn? You’d think the stinging rebuke issued by Missouri voters in August, when they defeated a no-rights-at-work ballot measure by a more than two-to-one vote, would have sent a message.

RTW is a ruse. Workers mustn’t let elected officials forget it.

Fraternally,

James P. Hoffa
Teamsters General President

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Railroad retiree earnings limits to increase in 2019

Railroad retirement annuitants subject to earnings restrictions can earn more in 2019 without having their benefits reduced as a result of increases in earnings limits indexed to average national wage increases.

Like social security benefits, some railroad retirement benefit payments are subject to deductions if an annuitant’s earnings exceed certain exempt amounts. These earnings restrictions apply to those who have not attained full social security retirement age. For employee and spouse annuitants, full retirement age ranges from age 65 for those born before 1938 to age 67 for those born in 1960 or later. For survivor annuities, full retirement age is attained to those who have not attained retirement age in 2019, the exempt earnings amount, for the months before the month full retirement age is attained. Increases to $46,920 in 2019 from $45,360 in 2018. For those under full retirement age, the earnings deduction is $1 for every $2 of earnings over the exempt amount. For those attaining full retirement age in 2019, the deduction is $1 for every $3 of earnings over the exempt amount in the months before the month full retirement age is attained. When applicable, these earnings deductions are assessed on the tier I and tier II, and vested dual benefit portions of railroad retirement employee and spouse annuities, and the tier I, tier II, and vested dual benefit portions of survivor benefits.

All earnings received for services rendered, plus any net earnings from self-employment, are considered when assessing deductions for earnings. Interest, dividends, certain rental income, or income from stocks, bonds, or other investments are not considered earnings for this purpose. Retired employees and spouses, regardless of age, who work for their last pre-retirement non-railroad employer are also subject to additional earnings deduction in their tier II and supplemental benefits, of $1 for every $2 in earnings up to a maximum reduction of 50 percent of this earnings restriction does not change from year to year and does not allow for an exempt amount. A spouse benefit is subject to reduction not only for the spouse’s earnings, but also for the earnings of the employee, regardless of whether the earnings are from service for the last pre-retirement non-railroad employer or other post-retirement employment. Special work restrictions continue to be applicable to disability annuitants in 2019. The monthly disability earnings limit increases to $950 in 2019 from $920 in 2018. Regardless of age and/or earnings, no railroad retirement annuity is payable for any month in which an annuitant (retired employee, spouse, or survivor) works for a railroad employer or railroad union.

SEQUESTRATION RATE ADJUSTED, AFFECTED BENEFITS TO RISE

Starting October 1, 2018, the U.S. Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) will reduce railroad unemployment and sickness insurance benefits by 6.2 percent, down from the current 6.6 percent reduction, as required by law.

The adjusted reduction amount is based on revised projections of benefit claims and payments under the Railroad Unemployment Insurance Act. It will remain in effect through September 30, 2019, the end of the fiscal year. Reductions in future fiscal years, should they occur, will be calculated based on applicable law.

The daily benefit rate is $77, so the 6.2 percent reduction in railroad unemployment and sickness benefits will reduce the maximum amount payable in a 2-week period with 10 days of unemploy-ment from $770.00 to $722.26. Certain railroad sickness benefits are also subject to regular tier I railroad retirement taxes, resulting in a further reduction of 7.65 percent. Applying the 6.2 percent reduction to those sickness benefits will result in a maximum 2-week total of $667.01.

These reductions are required under the Budget Control Act of 2011 and a subsequent sequestration order to implement the mandated cuts. The law exempted social security benefits, as well as railroad retirement, survivor, and disability benefits paid by the RRB, from sequestration.

When sequestration first took effect in March 2013, railroad unemployment and sickness benefits were subject to a 9.2 percent reduction. This amount was then adjusted to 7.2 percent in October 2013, 7.3 percent in October 2014, 6.8 percent in October 2015, 6.9 percent in October 2016, and 6.6 percent in October 2017, as required by law.

In fiscal year 2017, the RRB paid almost $12.6 billion in retirement and survivor benefits to almost 548,000 beneficiaries, and net unemployment and sickness benefits of almost $105.4 million to approximately 28,000 claimants.

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President Pierce addresses TCRC delegates in Vancouver

President Pierce addresses the attendees at the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) quadrennial convention in Vancouver on September 18.

"This shared history is not something that simply disappeared when the BLET merged with the TCRC in 2004 and the U.S. and Canadian Rail Conferences were formed," he said.

President Pierce then described how BLET and TCRC recently fought together to overturn the Canadian Pacific Railway’s efforts to eliminate the crew change point at Emerson and run crews through between Winnipeg and Thief River Falls. He also discussed how the BLET and TCRC are collaborating to strengthen NAFTA to explicitly protect the jobs of Canadian and American railroad workers.

"The bonds created by our shared history made that collaboration feel more like a family reunion than anything else," President Pierce said.

Teamsters Canada represents 125,000 members north of the border, including more than 16,000 TCRC members who work in the railroad industry. TCRC is the collective bargaining representative for workers at the Canadian National, Canadian Pacific, as well as the majority of the short line railways in Canada.

A TRANSCRIPT OF PRESIDENT PIERCE’S REMARKS CAN BE FOUND AT: www.ble-t.org/pr/pdf/DRP_TCRC_SPEECH_FINAL.pdf

BLET hosts Town Hall Meetings in Houston, San Antonio, and Arlington

President Pierce addresses delegates at the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) quadrennial convention in Vancouver on September 18.

Representing the National Division at the convention were: National President Dennis R. Pierce; Vice President and National Legislative Representative John P. Tolman; and Vice President Michael Prinster.

Also in attendance was Vice President-Elect Alan Holdcraft, who helped organize the meetings in his role as General Chairman of the BNSF (former ATRSF) General Committee of Adjustment. Also coordinating the series of meetings were: UP-Southern Region General Chairman Dana Marlowe; BNSF (former STL-SF) General Chairman Jeff Thierstein; BNSF (former C&S/CPR/ FWD) General Chairman Bobby Brown; and Kansas City Southern General Chairman David Spradlin. Dozens of members from those GCAs were in attendance at the informational sessions.

President Pierce chaired the meetings and many items were discussed, including the Supreme Court’s Janus decision, corporate greed, and the war on American workers. The general theme was that elections have consequences. Each session included an extended question-and-answer session with the officers.

“These Town Hall meetings are an important forum for the free exchange of thoughts and information with our Brothers and Sisters,” President Pierce said. “The meetings in Texas were well attended and it is important to thank the members who took the time to show up, listen, and ask questions. Meetings of this type help us to build a stronger Brotherhood, and I thank you for your participation.”

RRB: MEDICARE PART B PREMIUMS FOR 2019

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services has announced that the standard monthly Part B premium will be $135.50 in 2019, a slight increase from $134.00 in 2018. However, some Medicare beneficiaries will pay slightly less than this amount. By law, Part B premiums from current enrollees cannot increase by more than the amount of the cost-of-living adjustment for social security (railroad retirement for rail beneficiaries).

Since that adjustment is 2.8 percent in 2019, about 2 million Medicare beneficiaries will see an increase in their Part B premiums but still pay less than $135.50. The standard premium amount will also apply to new enrollees in the program, and certain beneficiaries will continue to pay higher premiums based on their modified adjusted gross income.

The monthly premiums that include income-related adjustments for 2019 will range from $189.60 up to $460.50, depending on the extent to which an individual beneficiary’s modified adjusted gross income exceeds the standard Part B premium. The Social Security Administration (SSA) is responsible for all income-related monthly adjustment amount determinations. To make the determinations, SSA uses the most recent tax return information available from the Internal Revenue Service. For 2019, that will usually be the beneficiary’s 2017 tax return, or for new enrollees in the program, their 2016 tax return.

Those rail retirement and social security Medicare beneficiaries affected by the 2019 Part B and income-related premium changes will receive a notice from SSA by the end of the year. The notice will include an explanation of the circumstances where a beneficiary may request a new determination. Persons who have questions or would like to request a new determination should contact SSA after receiving their notice.

Additional information about Medicare coverage, including specific benefits and dollar amounts, can be found at Medicare.gov.

GA-46000 LIFETIME MAXIMUM ADJUSTED FOR 2019

The lifetime maximum benefit for the Railroad Employees National Early Retirement Major Medical Benefit Plan (also known as ERMA or GA-46000) will increase from $162,500 to $166,400 on January 1, 2019.

At the end of 2001, Labor and Management agreed on various procedures to administer the annual changes in the amount of the lifetime maximum benefit under the ERMA plan. In conjunction with the formula established in 2001, a new lifetime maximum was calculated for 2019 by utilizing the October 2018 consumer price index (CPI) data for Hospitals and Related Services and Physicians Services.

Additionally, for individuals who have reached the lifetime maximum, the incremental maximum available is applied to eligible expenses submitted for dates of service on or after the effective date of the new maximum. For 2019, this amount will be $3,900. This change will apply to all railroads and crafts participating in ERMA.
Buyouts and Railroad Retirement Benefits

1. Would leaving railroad work and accepting a buyout mean that an employee forfeits any future entitlement to an annuity under the Railroad Retirement Act?

As long as an employee has acquired at least 10 years (120 months) of creditable railroad service, or 5 years (60 months) of creditable service if such service was performed after 1995, he or she would still be eligible for a regular railroad retirement annuity upon reaching retirement age, or, if totally disabled, for an annuity before retirement age, regardless of whether or not a buyout was accepted.

However, if a person permanently leaves railroad employment before attaining retirement age, the employee may not be able to meet the requirements for certain other benefits, particularly the current connection requirement for annuities based on occupational, rather than total, disability and for supplemental annuities paid by the RRB to career employees.

In addition, if an employee does not have a current connection, the Social Security Administration, rather than the RRB, would have jurisdiction of any survivor benefits that become payable on the basis of the employee’s combined railroad retirement and social security coverage. The survivor benefits payable by the RRB are generally greater than those paid by the Social Security Administration.

2. How are buyout payments treated under the Railroad Retirement and Railroad Unemployment Insurance Acts?

Buyout payments that result from the abolishment of an employee’s job are creditable as compensation under the Railroad Retirement Act.

The Social Security Administration may consider the payment a separation allowance, if the employee relinquishes job rights and has the payment he or she receives credited to one month (or [2] accepting a dismissal allowance, retaining job rights and having the payment credited to the months for which it is allocated. What are some of the railroad retirement considerations the employee should keep in mind?

Individual factors such as an employee’s age and service should be considered for railroad retirement purposes. The employee’s current connection may not be broken, even if the employee works in regular railroad employment after the 30-month period and before retirement, or death if that occurs earlier. Nonrailroad employment in that interval will likely break the employee’s current connection. However, a current connection can be maintained for purposes of supplemental and survivor annuities, but not occupational disability annuities, if the employee completed 25 years of railroad service, was involuntarily terminated without fault from the railroad industry, and did not thereafter decline an offer of employment in the same class or craft in the railroad industry, regardless of the distance to the new position. If all of these requirements are met, an employee’s current connection may not be broken, even if the employee works in regular railroad employment after the 30-month period and before retirement, or death. This exception to the normal current connection requirements became effective October 1, 1981, but only for employees still living on that date who left the railroad industry on or after October 1, 1975, or who were on leave of absence, on furlough, or absent due to injury on October 1, 1975.

5. Would the acceptance of a buyout have any effect on determining whether an employee could maintain a current connection under the exception provision?

In cases where an employee has no option to remain in the service of his or her employer, the termination of the employment is considered involuntary, regardless of whether the employee does or does not receive a separation or dismissal allowance. However, an employee who chooses a separation allowance instead of keeping his or her separation rights to railroad employment would, for railroad retirement purposes, generally be considered to have voluntarily terminated railroad service, and, consequently, would not maintain a current connection under the exception provision.

6. An employee with 25 years of service is offered a buyout with the option of either taking payment in a single lump sum, or receiving monthly payments until retirement age. Could the method of payment affect the employee’s current connection under the exception provision?

If the employee had the choice to remain in employer service and voluntarily relinquish job rights prior to accepting the payments, his or her current connection would not be maintained under the exception provisions regardless of which payment option is chosen. Therefore, nonrailroad work after the 30-month period and before retirement, or the employee’s death if earlier, could break the employee’s current connection. Such an employee could only meet the current connection requirement under the normal procedures.

7. Is it always advantageous to maintain a current connection?

While a current connection is generally advantageous for railroad retirement purposes, the costs of maintaining a current connection could outweigh its value, depending on individual circumstances. There may be other financial or personal factors involved besides railroad retirement eligibility and/or the preservation of a current connection, and these will vary from individual to individual.

8. Are separation and dismissal allowances subject to railroad retirement payroll taxes?

Under the Railroad Retirement Tax Act, which is administered by the Internal Revenue Service, payments of compensation subject to tier I tax are subject to tier I, tier II, and Medicare taxes on earnings up to the annual maximum earnings basis in effect when the compensation was paid. This is true whether payment is made in a lump sum or on a periodic basis.

To the extent that a separation allowance does not yield additional tier II railroad retirement service credits, a lump sum, approximating part or all of the railroad retirement tier II payroll taxes deduced from the separation allowance, will be paid upon retirement to employees meeting minimum service requirements. This lump sum applies to separations made after 1984.

If an employee receives a dismissal allowance, the employee is credited with the services for the tier II taxes deducted from the dismissal allowance payments. Consequently, such a lump sum would not be payable.

If an employee has an option about how a buyout is to be distributed, he or she should consider the impact of both...
BLET member helps Santa Train complete 2018 run

The 76th annual CSX Santa Train ran safely and on-time again this year, thanks in large part to a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen.

Every November, Santa Claus trades his sleigh and reindeer for a CSX train ride through Appalachia. On November 17, Santa and his elves distributed nearly 17 tons of toys, food, school supplies, and other donated gifts to children of all ages at 14 stops in rural communities in eastern Kentucky, southwest Virginia, and eastern Tennessee. The 110-mile journey begins at Shelby Yard in Pikeville, Ky., and runs south to Kingsport, Tenn.

Tens of thousands gathered trackside to snap photos, catch presents, and get a glimpse of Santa Claus. While an annual tradition for many, in rural Appalachia, the 76th anniversary was particularly special for BLET member and CSX engineer Joe Barr.

Brother Barr is married with two daughters. He hired out with CSX in 1994 and earned promotion to locomotive engineer in the summer of 1997, at which time he joined BLET Division 781 (Erwin, Tenn.). Brother Barr has been a member of Division 781 since June 1, 1997.

A member of BLET Division 781 traditionally operates the Santa Train each year. The train traverses difficult terrain and the BLET members are intimately familiar with the route’s many challenging hills and curves. They are uniquely qualified for the job and are extremely proud of their contributions to the Santa Train heritage.

In addition to Santa, this year’s special guest was country music stars Maddie and Tae, who distributed gifts along the route and performed a concert in Kingsport, Tenn., at the end of the train’s route. CSX, Food City, the Kingsport Chamber of Commerce, Appalachian Power and Soles4Souls sponsored the annual tradition.

Where can employees get more specific information on how benefits payable by the RRB are affected by a buyout?

Employees can get more information online or by phone. Field Office Locator provides easy access to every field office webpage where the street address and other service information is posted, as well as the option to email an office directly using the feature labeled Send a Message. The agency’s toll-free number, 1-877-772-5772, is equipped with an automated menu offering a variety of service options, including being transferred to an office to speak with a representative, leave a message, or find the address of a local field office. The agency also maintains a TTY number, 312-731-4700, to accommodate those with hearing or speech impairments. Most RRB offices are open to the public on weekdays from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., except on Wednesdays when offices are open from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. RRB offices are closed on Federal holidays.

Would an employee be able to receive unemployment or sickness benefits paid by the RRB after accepting a separation allowance?

An employee who accepts a separation allowance cannot receive unemployment or sickness benefits for roughly the period of time it would have taken to earn the amount of the allowance at his or her straight-time rate of pay. This is true regardless of whether the allowance is paid in a lump sum or installments. For example, if an employee’s salary was $3,000 a month with overtime pay and the allowance was $12,000, he or she would be disqualified from receiving benefits for approximately four months.

Can an employee receive unemployment benefits after he or her separation allowance disqualification period has ended?

An employee who has not obtained new employment by the end of the disqualification period and is still actively seeking work may be eligible for unemployment benefits at that time. The employee must meet all the usual eligibility requirements, including the availability for work requirement. An employee can establish his or her availability for work by demonstrating a willingness to work and making significant efforts to obtain work. In judging the employee’s willingness to work, the RRB considers, among other factors, the reason the employee accepted the separation allowance and the extent of his or her work-seeking efforts during the disqualification period.

How would the acceptance of a dismissal allowance affect an employee’s eligibility for unemployment and sickness benefits?

Payments made under a dismissal allowance would be considered remuneration under the Railroad Unemployment Insurance Act and the employee would not be eligible for unemployment or sickness benefits during the period the dismissal allowance is being paid. The employee may, of course, be eligible for benefits after the end of this period if he or she is still actively seeking work or is unable to work because of illness or injury.

Where can employees get more information about how benefits payable by the RRB are affected by a buyout?
Southbound Short Line: A southbound Indiana Railroad freight train passes by the distant signal to the interlocking in Sullivan, Ind., November/December 2018