Rail Chiefs announce formation of Coordinated Bargaining Coalition

Top leaders of 10 rail unions announced that their organizations will be participating in coordinated bargaining in the round of national negotiations that began on November 1, 2019. 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 Rail Department Director John Mansker, IBEW Rail Department Director Bill Bohne, NCFO President John Thacker, SMART–TD President Jeremy Ferguson, TWU Railroad Division Director John Felix, 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 who will be impacted by this round of negotiations.

Mark your calendars and plan to attend one or both of the BLET’s 2020 regional meetings! Details coming soon.
Thank You to Our Members Both Past and Present

On October 22, the BLET hosted a Town Hall meeting in Seattle for members living and working in the Pacific Northwest. Dozens of members were in attendance, primarily representing workers from Amtrak, BNSF, and the Union Pacific.

BLET National President Dennis R. Pierce and National Vice President Mike Priester represented the National Division at the meeting. Also in attendance were Mark Kenny, Amtrak General Chairman; Kent Puotis, BNSF/MRL General Chairman; Steve Lephouse, UP Western Region General Chairman; and Shahraim Allen, Washington State Legislative Board Chairman.

President Pierce gave an update to members regarding affairs of the National Division, and engaged in a lengthy question and answer session with the members following his presentation.

On behalf of the BLET Advisory Board, I wish you all a Happy Thanksgiving.

Denise R. Pierce
BLET National President

2019 BLET National President's Message

While our work at the railroad often prevent us from fully enjoying the fruits of our labor, we are blessed with the knowledge that our hard work and dedication puts food on the table and clothes on the backs of our children and families.

The BLET stands as the leading rail labor union in America. BLET members, officers and all workers who are fighting overseas or are stationed at military bases throughout the world and cannot be home this year. Let us also remember our own BLET Brothers and Sisters, who are sitting in the cab of a locomotive or in a hotel instead of at the Thanksgiving dinner table with their families.

Let us remember those who have fallen in the workplace; not only our members, but all railroad workers and all workers who have given their lives in the performance of their duties.

At this time of year, I would also like to express my appreciation to our Brotherhood’s Advisory Board. I am also thankful for all of our Local Division officers, as well as the officers and staff serving General Committees of Adjustment and State Legislative Boards throughout the country. These men and women are some of the hardest working individuals in the entire Brotherhood, and they deserve our respect and gratitude—not only during the holiday season, but also all year long.

Also deserving of gratitude and thanks are our staff at National Division headquarters in Independence, our National Legislative office in Washington, D.C., and our BLET Auxiliary. But most of all, I am thankful for our members, both past and present. We owe a debt of gratitude to the Brothers and Sisters of past generations, whose commitment and sacrifice helped to lay a solid foundation for the successes enjoyed by our Brotherhood and all members for over 156 years. And I am also proud of today’s generation of locomotive engineers and trainmen for continuing to build upon that foundation so that today, the BLET stands as the leading rail labor union in America.

Finally, Thanksgiving can be an especially challenging time of year for BLET members and their families. Many members will find themselves in the cab of a locomotive or at an away-from-home terminal instead of at the dinner table with loved ones. While our work at the railroad often prevent us from fully enjoying the fruits of our labor, we are blessed with the knowledge that our hard work and dedication puts food on the table and clothes on the backs of our children and families. Please join me in keeping all hardworking BLET members in our thoughts and prayers for a safe journey back home.

On behalf of the BLET Advisory Board, I wish you all a Happy Thanksgiving.

Denise R. Pierce
BLET National President

BLET National Division Electronic Communications Policy

Official communications between BLET members and the National Division require a hard copy of the correspondence, bearing a signature, being received by the National President to be considered "official communication." This is to provide that the actual question(s) are addressed, and ensures that when official interpretations are made they have reference to a specific request and can be used in future correspondence.

The volume of e-mails received makes it impossible for the National President to answer all unofficial communications. Therefore, it is the policy of the BLET that e-mails addressed to the National President will be reviewed and forwarded to the appropriate officer or staff for a timely response; however, an e-mail message is not considered official communication.

Moreover, anonymous e-mails and e-mails that do not provide sufficient information concerning the sender to enable National Division staff to confirm the sender’s membership status will not receive any reply or acknowledgement. This policy is intended to allow the National President to be aware of the opinions and suggestions of the membership, while at the same time providing a timely response to the member’s unofficial communication, if a response is necessary, without needlessly expending limited BLET resources.

Adopted at Cleveland, Ohio on July 22, 2010.
A s we head toward 2020, one thing is clear: Whoever is elected president will have to confront major challenges that have a significant impact on the livelihoods of millions. For Teamster members and working people across America, these challenges include numerous crises that threaten the existence of our diminishing middle class. The financial security of 1.5 million retirees is at risk because hundreds of multi-employer pension plans are in danger of failing. Collective bargaining rights — the backbone of America’s middle class — are under attack. And millions upon millions of U.S. jobs are being shipped overseas because of unfair trade practices favored by big business.

That is why the Teamsters are embarking on a 2020 presidential election endorsement process shaped by and for our 1.4 million members nationwide who represent working Americans who vote.

In recent months, tens of thousands of Teamsters completed our 2020 survey at work sites, union meetings and online to provide us with insight into what their top election issues are. Members’ responses made it overwhelmingly clear they’re looking for a president who will focus on three core issues: protecting pensions and retirement security, expanding collective bargaining rights and pursuing fair trade agreements. Candidates know that Teamsters vote, and that our members — many of whom reside in critical early primary and swing states — will shape the outcome of the 2020 election. But our members can’t be easily won. Their voices, and the voices of all American workers, must be heard.

Finally, because it is not enough for candidates just to say that they stand with working people, we are inviting them to join us in action fighting on the front lines. We’ve asked all candidates to partner with us in support of workers, either at a strike line or an organizing committee meeting.

The stakes in the 2020 election could not be higher for working people. The Teamsters are ready to make a difference in the fight and we’re challenging candidates to be bold in their stand alongside working Americans.

Fraternally,

James P. Hoffa
Teamsters General President
BLET members urged to contact Congress on two critical issues as union lobbies in D.C.

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) is urging all members to contact their Representatives and Senators in Congress to support the union’s two most pressing legislative issues: foreign crews operating trains into the United States at the southern U.S./Mexican border, and two-person train crews.

In addition to this nationwide membership lobbying campaign, the Brotherhood had booths on the ground last month in Washington, D.C., as nearly two dozen BLET officers made face-to-face visits with members of Congress to educate them on the importance of these two safety issues.

CROSS-BORDER RAIL OPERATIONS

On October 21, U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) introduced S. 2652, a bill that supports the BLET’s position on train crew cross border issues with Mexico. The bill would amend title 49 of the United States Code to provide that only citizens or nationals of the United States may operate trains within the United States that originate in Mexico. All members are urged to contact their Senators to urge support for this much needed legislation, which is designed to help protect BLET member jobs. A copy of the bill is available here: bit.ly/2P9Jqcf.

Senator Blumenthal’s bill comes on the heels of similar legislation introduced over the summer in the U.S. House of Representatives. The House version of the bill, H.R. 3896 (bit.ly/2SywNNz), also would provide that only citizens or nationals of the United States may operate trains within the United States that originate in Mexico. H.R. 3896, which was introduced by Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-IL), Chairman of the Railroad Subcommittee, and co-sponsored by Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA).

TWO-PERSON CREWS

Also, BLET members and their families are urged to contact their Representatives in the House and their Senators to support the Safe Freight Act. H.R. 1748, was introduced in the House by Rep. Don Young (R-AK) and S. 1979 was introduced in the Senate by Ed Markey (D-MA). With 114 co-sponsors in the House and 12 in the Senate, these bills have appeal across both parties and seek to put a certified engineer and a certified conductor on freight trains in the U.S.

Copies of the two-person crew bills can be found at www.congress.gov. House version: bit.ly/2hiJ1SO Senate version: bit.ly/2HuQyVR To find your Representative’s or Senators’ contact information, please visit: www.house.gov or www.senate.gov

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

On October 22 and 23, nearly two dozen BLET officers converged on the Nation’s Capital to meet in person with members of Congress to lobby on the Mexican cross-border issue and for the Safe Freight Act. This follows significant lobbying efforts previously held in July and August 2019.

Vice President and National Legislative Representative John Tolman lead the BLET lobbyists, along with Director of Legislative and Political Affairs Bob Hagan and Director of Regulatory Affairs Vince Verna. They were accompanied by 19 officers from BLET State Legislative Boards and General Committees of Adjustment representing all areas of the country.

“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,” BLET National President Dennis R. Pierce said. “Please help us to protect our jobs, our craft and our future.” Updates on the issues will be provided as they develop in Washington D.C.

BLET members ratify new contracts with TASI, Louisville & Indiana

Members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen have ratified two new contracts with Transit America Services Inc. (TASI) for Caltrain engineers, and one with the Louisville & Indiana Railroad (LIRC).

The TASI agreement was ratified on October 15 and governs wages, benefits and work rules for more than 60 members. The five-year agreement provides for general wage increases of 14.5% through 2021, including retroactive pay to 2017. BLET National President Dennis R. Pierce recognized General Chairman Mark Kenny and the members of the Amtrak General Committee of Adjustment’s (GCA) Executive Committee for bringing the negotiations to a successful conclusion.

He also thanked the TASI membership for their perseverance and participation in the negotiating process. With an average of 65,000 riders each weekday, Caltrain commuter service operates between San Francisco on the north end, through San Jose to Gilroy on the south end. Previously, Amtrak operated the service until the spring of 2015.

The LIRC contract was ratified on October 28 and governs wages, benefits and work rules for approximately 20 members. The five-year agreement runs through November 2024 and provides a 17% increase in wages over the life of the agreement. The BLET successfully negotiated guaranteed rest days on the guaranteed extra bad, secured expanded bereavement leave, and protected the seniority of the membership when filling vacancies.

President Pierce recognized General Chairman Randy Fannon, Norfolk Southern Eastern Lines GCA, and the members of his negotiating team for their hard work throughout negotiations. President Pierce also thanked the BLET membership for voting in this most important of union processes.

The Louisville & Indiana Railroad is a subsidiary of the Anacostia Rail Holdings Company and is headquartered in Jeffersonville, Ind. Its 155-mile main line runs between Louisville, Ky., and Indianapolis. Its Anacostia Rail Holdings acquired the former Pennsylvania Railroad trackage from Connell and began operating 25 years ago on March 12, 1994. It connects with CSX, Norfolk Southern, the Indiana Rail Road, and the Paducah & Louisville Railway.
BLET part of union group suing to overturn new NMB rule that undermines workers

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, 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 from an anti-union rule change recently implemented by the National Mediation Board (NMB).

In a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) dated January 31, 2019, the NMB proposed a rule change that would make it easier to decertify labor unions under the Railway Labor Act. Also, the rule doubles the amount of time a union has to wait before it can apply to again become the representative after a decertification from one year to two years. By a 2-1 vote, the NMB adopted the Final Rule during the summer of 2019.

According to the unions’ lawsuit, “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.”

BLET National President Dennis R. Pierce said, “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 unions’ lawsuit asks the court to declare that the NMB’s Final Rule is invalid because it exceeds the Board’s statutory authority under, and is contrary to, the Railway Labor Act. The unions also ask the court to declare that the NMB’s Final Rule is invalid because it is arbitrary, capricious, an abuse of discretion, or otherwise not in accordance with law.

The complaint filed by the unions states: “The NMB has exclusive jurisdiction to resolve representation disputes in the air and rail transportation industries. But Congress has expressly limited the circumstances in which the Board may exercise that jurisdiction. It may only do so at the request of employees, and it may only act when an individual or organization seeks to be ‘certified as the representative of ... employees.’ Absent such an application, Congress has instructed that the Board ‘shall not direct an election or use any other method to determine who shall be the representative.’ In contravention of this express limit on its jurisdiction, and in an abrupt deviation from over 80 years of past practice, the Board in a Final Rule issued on July 26, 2019 now claims authority to direct an election based on an application by any employer seeking exclusively to ‘decertify’ an existing representative. This action is in excess of the Board’s long-standing jurisdiction and is a ‘gross violation’ of the Railway Labor Act and should be enjoined.”

The NMB’s new rule also bans any union from attempting to re-organize the workforce for two years, an increase from the current one-year ban. “There is no legitimate reason for this limitation on employees’ statutory rights to organize,” according to the unions’ lawsuit. “This new and extraordinary limitation on employee’s statutory rights is wholly unjustified by the Board, and is twice as long as the existing limits on representation elections following an effective representation election under the Board’s long-standing prior procedures. This aspect of the Final Rule is arbitrary and capricious.”

The suit was filed in the United States District Court for the District of Columbia on October 16, 2019.

“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.”

— Dennis Pierce, BLET National President

SIGN UP FOR BLET NEWS FLASHES!

Register at www.ble-t.org to get Brotherhood news emailed to you

Stay up-to-date with the latest Brotherhood news by going to the BLET website and signing up to receive BLET News Flash alerts via email. The News Flash alerts are news articles from the BLET National Division website that are automatically emailed to you.

To register online, go to www.ble-t.org/newsflash. On this page, you will find an area to enter your email address and click subscribe to begin receiving the most current news from the BLET National Division.

It is a great way to keep informed on the most recent issues impacting your job, your contract and your Brotherhood.

BLET establishes new Short Line Department

President Pierce has authorized the creation of a Short Line Department at the National Division level.

The new BLET Short Line Department will expand the union’s ability to organize new members throughout the United States. Also, it will better serve current members from very small divisions who work for short line railroads by providing assistance from the National Division during contract negotiations and with other matters while also providing them with the freedom to form their own local grievance committees for contract enforcement and grievance handling at the local level.

In creating the new Short Line Department, President Pierce charted a single Local Division — Division 16 — as the home for new and future short line members. Division 16 is structured to allow for the creation of multiple Sub-Chapters for each individual short line.

President Pierce has appointed BLET National Vice President Mike Twombly to serve as Head of the BLET Short Line Department and Special Representative Paul Aird as the Director of the BLET Short Line Department.

“President Twombly has been assigned to assist numerous short line railroads over his past 11 years on the BLET Advisory Board, negotiating many contracts that have benefitted countless members,” President Pierce said. “He is a natural fit for the job, and I have every confidence that he will do an excellent job as Head of the BLET Short Line Department.”

President Pierce estimates that there are thousands of short line workers currently employed on non-union properties throughout the United States. “The new Short Line Division structure is expected to give the National Division added flexibility to organize new members and to grow our organization,” President Pierce said. “Brother Aird, who also serves the National Division as Director of Organizing, is the ideal candidate to serve as Director of the Short Line Division.”

To begin the process, short line members of five BLET Divisions are being merged into Division 16, including: Division 394 (Bell Railway of Chicago); the portion of Division 421 (Buffalo, N.Y.) that represents locomotive engineers and train service employees on the Western New York & Pennsylvania Railroad; the portion of Division 584 (Joseph, Ill.) that represents locomotive employee engineers on the Gary Railroad; Division 700 (Union Railroad); and Division 895 (South Buffalo Railway). The mergers into Division 16 became effective November 1, 2019.

President Twombly explains: “The structure of the Short Line Department ensures that collective bargaining, claim and grievance handling, and the discipline process are protected during day-to-day operations on behalf of the membership, while protecting local representation through and in coordination with each subdivision’s grievance committee. By establishing consistent leadership from the National Division and pooling resources back on the combined properties, it is easier and more efficient to establish one full roster of elected officers with one executive board in connection with separate subdivision grievance committees to handle the business of each railroad. The Short Line Division is working with the National Division and elected local officers from each railroad to quickly establish this process.”

President Pierce is optimistic about the future of the new BLET Short Line Division.

“I thank our delegates at the Fourth National Convention for showing the foresight and wisdom to authorize creation of our new Short Line Division, and I know Brother Twombly and Brother Aird are up to the challenge of leading this new endeavor,” President Pierce said. “I am optimistic that the BLET will be able to provide a voice to America’s non-union short line railroad workers who are looking for the strength and protection that come from belonging to a union.”

NOVEMBER 2019

5

BLET National Vice President Mike Twombly, pictured here at the BLET’s Fourth National Convention in 2018, has been appointed Head of the BLET Short Line Department.
Ronnies E. Rhodes was re-elected by acclamation to his third full term as General Chairman at the Union Pacific-Central Region General Committee of Adjustment’s quadrennial meeting in New Orleans, La., October 8-9, 2019. All other officers of the GCA were also elected by acclamation.

Brother Rhodes is a Union Pacific locomotive engineer and a member of Division 915 (Alexandria, La.). He first joined the Brotherhood on March 1, 1980. Brother Rhodes has been serving as General Chairman since October 1, 2011, and was elected to the office of 1st Vice General Chairman at the GCA’s quadrennial meeting in 2008. He was re-elected by acclamation to continue serving as General Chairman at quadrennial meetings in 2011 and 2015.

Also elected were: Vice General Chairman Kyle J. Bagby, Division 81 (Kansas City, Kan.); Secretary-Treasurer and Kansas City Hub Vice General Chairman Scott D. Thibodeau, Division 81 (Kansas City, Kan.); Executive Committee Member Kevin S. Leyerle, Division 81 (Kansas City, Kan.); Little Rock Hub Alternate Vice General Chairman; and Kansas City Hub Alternate Vice General Chairman Chris S. Mul-lin, Division 336 (Osawatomie, Kan.); Little Rock Hub Alternate Vice General Chairman Kim Thomas, Division 182 (North Little Rock, Ark.); and St. Louis Hub Alternate Vice General Chairman Brian J. Young, Division 48 (St. Louis, Mo.).

The following Alternate officers were also elected: Alternate Secretary-Treasurer and Kansas City Hub Alternate Vice General Chairman; Alternate Secretary-Treasurer and Kansas City Hub Alternate Vice General Chairman Chris S. Mul-lin, Division 336 (Osawatomie, Kan.); Little Rock Hub Alternate Vice General Chairman Kim Thomas, Division 182 (North Little Rock, Ark.); and St. Louis Hub Alternate Vice General Chairman Brian J. Young, Division 48 (St. Louis, Mo.).

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Delegates elected the following Trustees: Jeff Jones, Division 619 (Jefferson City, Mo.); Kim Thomas, Division 182 (North Little Rock, Ark.); and Chader ick Black, Division 724 (Salem, Ill.). Elected to serve as Alternate Trustees were: Daniel Thielemann II, Division 152 (Kansas City, Mo.); W.J. (Joe) Fer-ris Jr., Division 152 (Kansas City, Mo.); and Brian Dotty, Division 251 (Villa Grove, Ill.).

Representing the BLET National Di vision at the meeting was National Pres ident Dennis R. Pierce and National Vice President Mark L. Wallace. Also in attendance was retired National Vice President Gil L. Gore.

“Brother Rhodes is a dynamic and re sourceful leader who continues to do an excellent job representing our member ship,” President Pierce said. “I congratu late and thank Brother Rhodes and all officers of the Union Pacific-Central Re gion General Committee of Adjustment for their service to our Brotherhood.”

Also in attendance were five other Union Pacific General Chairmen: Dick Crow, UP-Northern Region GCA; Dana Markow, UP-Southern Region GCA; Steve Leyslton, UP-Western Region GCA; Dave Geisler, UP-Eastern District GCA; and Brian Carr, UP-Western Lines GCA. Additionally, Missouri State Leg islative Board Chairman Calvin Groose was also in attendance.

The BLET’s UP-Central Region General Committee of Adjustment encompasses 18 BLET Divisions in five states (Arkansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Illinois and Kansas) and represents more than 2,200 active and retired members. ©

Officers and guests attending the Union Pacific-Central Region General Committee of Adjustment’s quadrennial meeting in New Orleans, La., October 8-9, 2019:

General Chairman Brian J. Young, Division 48 (St. Louis, Mo.); Vice General Chairman Scott D. Thibodeau, Division 81 (Kansas City, Kan.); and Brian Dotty, Division 251 (Villa Grove, Ill.).

Also elected were: Vice General Chairman Kyle J. Bagby, Division 81 (Kansas City, Kan.); Secretary-Treasurer and Kansas City Hub Alternate Vice General Chairman; and Kansas City Hub Alternate Vice General Chairman Chris S. Mul-lin, Division 336 (Osawatomie, Kan.); Little Rock Hub Alternate Vice General Chairman Kim Thomas, Division 182 (North Little Rock, Ark.); and St. Louis Hub Alternate Vice General Chairman Brian J. Young, Division 48 (St. Louis, Mo.). Additionally, Brother Baker was elected 1st Alternate Vice General Chair-man; Brother Thibodeau was elected 2nd Alternate Vice General Chairman; and Brother Young was elected 3rd Alternate Vice General Chairman.

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Jeff B. Rich of BLET Division 129 and Nashville (Tenn.) was recently elected by acclamation to his first full term as Chairman of the Tennessee State Legislative Board at the Board's quadrennial meeting in Nashville, Tenn., on October 4-5, 2019.

Brother Rich is a CSX locomotive engineer who has held continuous membership in the Brotherhood since November 1, 2000. He was elected to the position of Legislative Representative of Division 129 in 2015, which was the same year he was also elected to the Auditing Committee of the Tennessee State Legislative Board. He was then elected to the chairmanship in January 2018 after former chairman C.R. (Rusty) Jones was elected to serve as 2nd Vice Chairman of the Norfolk Southern Southern Lines General Committee of Adjustment.

Also elected were: First Vice Chairman Gregg S. Garland, Division 41 (Nashville, Tenn.), and Second Vice Chairman Myc C. Smallwood, Division 667 (Memphis, Tenn.); Secretary Treasurer Lee H. Myhan, Division 198 (Chattanooga, Tenn.); and Alternate Secretary Treasurer Janine L. Tate, Division 205 (Chattanooga, Tenn.). Elected to serve as Trustees were: Stan P. Smith, Division 4 (Memphis, Tenn.); Greg K. Hicks, Division 782 (Etowah, Tenn.); and Corey J. Williams, Division 610 (Bruceton, Tenn.).

Beginning the BLET National Division at the meeting were: National President Dennis Pierce; Vice President and National Legislative Representative John Tolman; Director of Regulatory Affairs Vincent Verna; and Special Representative and Director of Mobilization—Eastern Region Matt Kromyak.

“Brother Rich has done an excellent job representing the BLET in Tennessee,“ President Pierce said. “I am confident that he will continue to work hard to represent our members to the best of his ability. I congratulate Brother Rich and all officers of the Tennessee State Legislative Board and thank them for their dedicated service to our Brotherhood.”

Chairman Rich comes from a long line of railroaders dating back to the 1880s, many of whom participated in building the railroad labor community of Nashville, Tenn. Brother Rich hired out in 1947 in the Chickasaw & Eastern Railroad as a locomotive engineer, and during his tenure at that company, he also worked as a track laborer, a track foreman and a track inspector. In 1998, he became a member of CSX and attained his locomotive engineer seniority in 2000. He currently works in the Chattanooga/Subdivision in Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis as an engineer on local road switches.

Secretary-Treasurer Lee Myhan of BLET Division 111 (Chattanooga, Tenn.) also comes from a railroad family. He follows in the footsteps of his father, Gene, who is a retired Norfolk Southern engineer with 37 years of service. The elder Myhan was Secretary-Treasurer of both the Tennessee State Legislative Board and Division 198, retiring from his post with the Tennessee SLB in 2007. Lee, the younger Myhan, was elected Alternate Secretary-Treasurer at the Tennessee SLB’s 2015 quadrennial meeting as a result of increases in earnings. At the end of the year, and this information is available at www.medicare.gov. ●

Railroad Retirement Board Changes Set to Take Effect

If a railroad retirement or survivor annuitant also receives a social security or other government benefit, such as a public service pension, any cost-of-living increases in that benefit will offset the increase tier I benefit. However, tier II cost-of-living increases are not reduced by increases in other government benefits. If a widow(ER) whose annuity is being paid under the 2001 law is also entitled to an increased tier I benefit. However, tier II cost-of-living increases are not reduced by increases in other government benefits. If a widow(er) whose annuity is being paid under the 2001 law is also entitled to an increased tier I benefit. However, tier II cost-of-living increases are not reduced by increases in other government benefits.

Railroad Retirement benefits will increase in January 2020 due to a rise in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) from the third quarter of 2018 to the corresponding period of the current year. The increases are calculated in both the tier I and tier II benefits included in a railroad retirement annuity. Tier I benefits, like social security payments, are subject to an earnings limit of 50 percent, which is the percentage of the CPI rise. Tier II benefits will go up by 0.5 percent, which is 32.5 percent of the CPI increase. Tier II benefits will increase by 0.5 percent, which is a further 0.5 percent of the CPI change.

In January 2020, the average regular railroad retirement employee annuity will increase $36.83 to $2,875 and the average of combined benefits for an employee and spouse will increase $350 a month to $4,174. For those aged 65 and older, this increase will be calculated based on the CPI change.

In December 2019, the BLET will mail notices to all annuitants providing a breakdown of the annuity rates payable to them in January 2020.

If a railroad retirement or survivor annuitant also receives a social security or other government benefit, such as a public service pension, any cost-of-living increases in that benefit will offset the increase tier I benefit.

To calculate the tier II cost-of-living adjustments for 2020, the cost-of-living adjustment is determined by dividing the increase in the average CPI by the average CPI for the 12-month period ending in January 2019. The result is then applied to the railroad retirement benefit of the annuitant who is entitled to the cost-of-living increase.

However, the total amount of the combined railroad retirement and tier II benefits cannot exceed the cost-of-living increase plus any increases in Medicare premiums. The cost-of-living increase follows a Tier I increase of 2.8 percent in January 2019, which had been the largest in 7 years. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services will announce Medicare Part B premiums for 2020 later this year, and this information is available at www.medicare.gov.

In late December the BLET will mail notices to all annuitants providing a breakdown of the annuity rates payable to them in January 2020.

Railroad retiree earnings limits will increase

Railroad retirement annuities, subject to earnings restrictions, can earn more in 2020 without having their benefits reduced. If earnings exceed the earnings limits indexed to 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. Those earnings restrictions apply to those who have not attained full social security retirement age. For employees and spouse annuities, full retirement age ranges from age 65 for those born before 1938 to age 67 for those born after 1959. For survivor annuities, full retirement age ranges from age 65 for those born before 1938 to age 67 for those born after 1961.

For those under full retirement age throughout 2020, the exempt earnings amount increases to $48,600 from $47,640 in 2019. For beneficiaries attaining full retirement age in 2020, the exempt earnings amount for the months before the full month full retirement age is attained increases to $48,600 in 2020 from $47,640 in 2019.

For those under full retirement age throughout 2020, the exempt earnings amount is $11,760 in 2020. For employers subject to the 2020 tax year for payroll tax, the amount increases to $48,600 in 2020 from $47,640 in 2019. For those under full retirement age through 2020, the exempt earnings amount is $11,760 in 2020. For employers subject to the 2020 tax year for payroll tax, the amount increases to $48,600 in 2020 from $47,640 in 2019. For special work restrictions continue to be applicable to disability annuities in 2020. The monthly disability earnings limits increase to $5900 in 2020 from $5900 in 2019.

Regardless of age and/or earnings, no railroad retirement earnings are payable for any month in which an annuitant’s earned income or earnings from self-employment, are subject to regular tier I railroad retirement taxes, resulting in a further reduction of 7.65 percent. Applying the 3.9 percent reduction to those annuitants in 2020 will result in a maximum 2-week total of $677.83.

Under the Budget Control Act of 2011, and a subsequent sequestration order to implement mandated cuts, railroad unemployment and sickness insurance benefits are reduced by a set percentage, which is subject to revision at the discretion of the U.S. President.

When sequestration first took effect in March 2013, railroad unemployment and sickness benefits were subject to a 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, 6.6 percent in October 2017, and 6.2 percent in October 2018, as required by law.

In fiscal year 2018, the BLET paid about $12.7 billion in retirement and survivor benefits to about 540,000 beneficiaries, and net railroad-unemployment-sickness benefits of about $2 billion, or approximately 24,000 claimants.
Photo of the Month: November 2019

AAR: RAIL TRAFFIC DOWN IN OCTOBER 2019

The Association of American Railroads (AAR) reported U.S. rail traffic for the week ending November 2, 2019, as well as for October 2019. U.S. railroads originated 1,224,477 carloads in October 2019, down 8.4 percent, or 112,703 carloads, from October 2018, U.S. railroads also originated 1,311,444 containers and trailers in October 2019, down 8.7 percent, or 113,910 trailers, from the same month last year. Combined U.S. railcar and intermodal originations in October 2019 were down 8.8 percent, or 226,613 carloads and intermodal units from October 2018. For the week ending November 2, total U.S. weekly rail traffic was 510,012 carloads and intermodal units, down 8.8 percent compared with the same week last year. Total carloads for the week ending November 2 were 245,319 carloads, down 8.7 percent compared with the same week in 2018. STB: U.S. CLASS I WORKFORCE DOWN IN OCTOBER 2019

As of mid-October, Class I railroads employed 134,582 people in the United States, down 1.67 percent from mid-September’s level and down 9.51 percent from October 2018’s count, according to Surface Transportation Board (STB) data. There were month-to-month decreases in the following job categories: applications; transportation (other than train and engine), down 0.31 percent to 4,537. On a year-over-year basis, the number of transportation employees (train and engine) was down 11.82 percent.

NORFOLK SOUTHERN FURLONGUES WORKERS IN CHATTANOOGA AND ALTOONA

Norfolk Southern furloughed 58 workers on November 4 and 5 in Chattanooga and Altoona, Tennessee. The railroad said the move was part of its company-wide cutback in diesel shop operations in response to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Not a photographer? The National Dispatcher’s Task Force produced the News. Are you a photographer? Note: please note only high resolution images can be used. If you would like to submit a photo for consideration, you may call Editor John Bentley at (216) 241-2630, ext. 248, or you can email photos@ble-t.org.

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