

Good morning Distinguish Board Members and RETAC Committee Members.

As we convene today, our craft finds ourselves at a pivotal point on our industry's path, with significant developments on the horizon. The pending recommendations from the NTSB investigation into the East Palestine derailment and the anticipated final rule from the FRA regarding Signalmen certification can influence our workforce and employment numbers.

I would like to highlight a key insight shared by BRS's attorney, Rich Edelman, which underscores the current state of employment levels. Rich's analysis sheds light on the changes we've observed, particularly in the maintenance-of-way and signal workforces across the Big four railroads.

Since 2016, there has been a discernible decline in these, with approximately a 20% reduction in workforce size, further compounded by a 10% decrease since 2019. A notable consequence of these shifts is the increased workload shouldered by our engineering departments. Despite static track mileage since 2016, 80% of today's workforce now contends with maintaining 100% of the infrastructure of 2016.

For instance, at BNSF, the track miles per employee have steadily increased from 5.37 in 2016 to 6.73 in 2022, reflecting a 20% rise since 2016 and a 6% increase since 2019. Similar trends are observed across CSXT, NS, and UP, with track miles per employee seeing notable upticks ranging from 17% to 22% since 2016. It is noteworthy that our membership numbers have virtually remained the same since our last meeting.

We're still contending with workforce shortages in various areas of the network, for instance in the southern end of CSX's system where there's a notable scarcity of signal workers to fill open positions. This challenge persists, and the BRS extends its support to aid railroad companies in their recruitment endeavors. In line with this commitment, our communications representative is currently participating in a job fair in DC, not only to gain firsthand experience but also to explore how the BRS can further contribute to addressing this industry-wide issue. This is being conducted jointly with Amtrack, CSX and IBEW.

During a recent workforce development meeting with the FRA, the question arose among attending rail unions about whether exit interviews were being conducted. While this wasn't a practice within our organization, we decided to explore it. We conducted a survey of 80 employees who left the industry at Class I railroads since December of last year. Half of the respondents had nine years or more of experience, while the remainder had less than a year.

The primary issue cited by respondents was work-life balance, with extensive travel being a major concern. Most traveling position schedules give employees 12 days off each month, which was often the only schedule option offered to new hires. The second most common reason for leaving was dissatisfaction with first-line supervision, characterized by fear-mongering and a disconnect with the workforce, particularly noted by veteran employees.

Regarding compensation and benefits, 90% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the package.

Our collaboration with NS and the FRA, known as the Signal Safety Collaboration, commenced in November 2023 with the aim of rebuilding relationships among all parties involved. NS's participation in this initiative is commendable, and we've found it to be highly beneficial for everyone involved. During field visits, we engage with as many workers as possible over two days, providing guidance, answering questions, and highlighting best practices while addressing any issues observed. The inclusion of the FRA as an advisor has alleviated pressure for regulatory citations, fostering a more collaborative and constructive environment. Our most recent field visit took place at the Bellevue yard in Ohio, following our participation in a safety event there in June 2023. During our discussions with yard workers, who work in the largest yard on the NS system, it became evident that they were severely understaffed, leading to exhausting 12-hour shifts and a noticeable decline in morale. However, upon our latest visit, we were pleased to find that the workforce has been replenished, allowing for normal shifts and a significant improvement in employee well-being. Talks are underway for a revised schedule that would grant workers a three-day weekend every other week and a maximum of three consecutive working days in a row. This positive change reflects NS's commitment to forward-thinking leadership, prioritizing safety, innovation, and long-term sustainability over short-term gains.

Yet, the emergence of investors such as Ancora, whose profit-centric strategies prioritize cost-cutting over collaborative efforts like the Signal Safety Collaboration, poses a significant threat. Their approach risks not only damaging employee morale but also undermining the recruitment and retention of skilled workers essential for ensuring safe and reliable service. Moreover, the pursuit of short-term profits at the expense of safety could have far-reaching consequences, particularly in the absence of comprehensive legislative measures to ensure rail safety. Failure to address these risks could lead to catastrophic outcomes, highlighting the urgent need for proactive measures to safeguard the integrity of rail operations and the well-being of those involved.

Finally, I extend heartfelt gratitude to Chairman Oberman on behalf of BRS, and all of rail labor, for that matter. Your unwavering commitment and tireless efforts during your tenure at the STB have not gone unnoticed. We are sincerely grateful for your consistent consideration of labor interests. As you embark on your well-deserved retirement, we wish you abundant joy and fulfillment in the years ahead.