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Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials:
“The State of Rail Workforce”
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Testimony Oral & Written By:

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Written Testimony

Good morning honorable members of the Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials Subcommittee. My name is Jerry Boles, President of the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen. It is my privilege to testify on “The State of the Rail Workforce”, from the perspective of the members of the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen. Our Organization is grateful for the opportunity to provide the viewpoints of our members; we are primarily responsible for the installation and maintenance of signal systems across the nation. Your decisions and actions directly impact their daily lives and working environment.

It is imperative to understand that the issues reflected in my testimony affect not only our members but also the general public. One of the most important topics affecting these groups is Positive Train Control. As we are all aware, PTC is a much-needed and long-overdue reality in this country. As we move forward with these systems, it is critical that those who install, monitor, and maintain PTC are properly trained on how the system works and how to trouble shoot issues. Recently, our Organization conducted a survey, wherein a portion of our membership was asked about their involvement with PTC. The survey, results enclosed, asked a segment of our membership if they were involved in the maintenance or installation of the PTC system on their railroad. The survey questioned if they were trained on PTC and if they believe the training was sufficient.

Of the five largest Class I railroads (BNSF Railway, Canadian National, CSX Transportation, Norfolk Southern, and Union Pacific), roughly 73 percent of the member responses indicated that they received some PTC training, but more telling, of those who received training only 21 percent believed it to be sufficient. Further, of those responses, roughly 77 percent of the employees surveyed were involved in the maintenance of PTC systems, and their responses indicated that only 21 percent of the group believed the training to be sufficient. Additionally, the data indicates that roughly 72 percent of the employees who responded were involved with the installation of PTC and only 24 percent of this group believed the

training to be sufficient. If you look at the same data gathered for the surveyed members employed by smaller railroads, roughly 67 percent of the employee responses indicated they had received some form of PTC training but only 20 percent indicated that the training was sufficient; roughly 48 percent of those members were involved in the maintenance of PTC systems but only 16 percent of that group answered that the training was sufficient. Nearly 48 percent of the employees surveyed from smaller railroads indicated that they were involved in the installation of PTC or PTC systems, and of that group only 15 percent believed the training to be sufficient. Similarly, for the employees of Class I railroads who participated in the survey, some were trained on PTC maintenance and/or installation but very few perceived this training to be sufficient. We believe this process can be improved if our organization is allowed to be significantly involved with the development and implementation of PTC training. This is an issue that must be addressed! Our members are responsible for public safety, their co-workers, the environment surrounding the railroads, and the valuable infrastructure of the railroads themselves. This information should not be overlooked or underestimated. Training and education of our members is paramount to the safety of the public; it cannot be allowed to take a back seat to any cost/benefit analysis.

As railroading has evolved, safety has always been the highest priority for the BRS. We have consistently fought to improve safety for our members and the public, through measures such as Roadway Worker Rules, Highway-Rail Grade Crossing regulations, and the Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008 guaranteeing the installation of Positive Train Control. These are just some of the innovations we are proud, as rail labor, to have accomplished. We continually work with all rail labor organizations, the FRA, the NTSB, railroads, and many other groups to ensure that our craft remains a driving force in safety.

Unfortunately, our membership fears all of these things and more are at risk with the implementation of Precision Scheduled Railroading, or PSR as it has become known throughout the industry. It is important when

discussing the concerns of our members, with regard to PSR, that we cover the daily issues of our signal workforce. We have heard from our members across the country that maintenance positions are being abolished and re-established with larger territories. These larger territories lead to increased testing requirements on each individual, less time for regular preventative maintenance, and heightened potential for equipment failures and signaling issues. These incidents often occur after hours, requiring our members to come in to work outside regularly assigned hours to trouble shoot and repair various problems. They must perform the above while conforming to the current Federal Hours of Service laws.

Under PSR, my office has heard numerous reports that many of these incidents are being deferred by the railroads until normal working hours, in an effort to avoid overtime costs. It is very easy to see the problem with this strategy, while it may save money and could possibly drive stock prices up on a short-term scale, we believe it compounds the issues previously mentioned. Not only do these maintenance employees have to cover their required routine periodic testing, support projects, and try and keep up with the regular maintenance of the equipment on their territories, they now must diagnose and repair the incidents that were deferred from the night or the weekend before...all in an effort to cut cost. It is easy to see how this formula could eventually result in catastrophe, but in some eyes the reward of lower costs and higher revenues outweigh the risks. Simply put, this is a practice we cannot condone.

When we ask our membership what PSR means to them, the answer is almost always the same—workforce reductions—followed by the lengthening of their maintenance territories and more work with fewer people. This thought has occurred at every railroad that has adopted this operating plan. These reductions are clearly reflected in our membership numbers, which have dropped almost seven percent since 2016. While we do not have access to membership numbers from the other railroad unions, I would speculate we are not alone in these workforce reductions. This practice is the exact opposite of what common sense should lead us to believe. With the installation of Positive Train Control, many of the

railroads throughout the country have added new assets and made territories more complex, this should lead to the addition of jobs, not workforce reduction!

This operating plan has led to many other troubling issues throughout the rail industry, including calls for fewer regulations. It is well known that many people have given their lives prior to the implementation of these regulations. Do we really want to return to a time that would put the public and our members at greater risk? We do not have to look very far to see issues where self-regulation exists, simply look to the airline industry and its recent problems. For us, many battles were fought to achieve routine periodic testing of Highway-Rail Grade Crossings throughout the industry, and now these necessary tests are under attack again as talks of de-regulation escalate throughout the industry. The outcome is evident, if left to self-regulate, the PSR operating model will do what is cheapest, not what is safest or in the best interest of the public and our members. It will lead to risk calculation that decides what solutions are financially justified and which are not. It will lead to unnecessary reductions in labor to raise revenues and stock prices with little thought about the impact these actions will have on the safety of our members, their workload, and the public. It will lead to the elimination of manpower and the understaffing of projects, so long as it keeps costs down and dividends up. Usually these actions will be without consequence, but sometimes they end in tragedy. It is our position that this was the case in Cayce, South Carolina, when technological or supervisory safeguards were not put in place during a signal cutover. Further, we believe when PSR dictates policy, overtime and personnel costs take precedence over sound safety decisions and practices which often lead to dangerous shortcuts.

As we move forward, we cannot allow terms like “Precision Scheduled Railroading” to distract us from the numerous safety issues confronting the industry. Stock prices and dividends should never undermine the safety of our nation’s railroads. Together, BRS, the railroads, and our government cannot allow infrastructure to crumble while profits soar and workforce reduction continue to overburden the very workers who are

responsible for the safety of the public. We are not the only ones who feel this way, as PSR spreads throughout the industry facilities begin closing and the workforces dwindle with little to no concern of how these cuts affect the workers and their communities. To help emphasize this point, we have attached a letter from United States Senators Ron Wyden and Jeffrey Merkley addressed to a major US railroad outlining their concerns over recent workforce reductions and layoffs because of PSR practices. This letter documents concerns for the local economy, agricultural producers, shippers, the workforce, and their families. We wholeheartedly echo these sentiments and concerns across the entire rail industry.

In our members eyes this is “the State of the Rail Workforce”, and this is what it means to them when they encounter “Precision Scheduled Railroading” in the workplace.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of our membership today and truly appreciate the opportunity to provide their perspectives to you.