



Credit: Creative Commons / Flickr user Bryan Hanson

For now, Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway is investing in its shipping business rather than adopting an efficiency scheme, embraced by some other large U.S. railroads, that risks worker and public safety.

# Rail Workers' Safety, Jobs in Jeopardy as Precision Scheduled Railroading Expands

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**An efficiency scheme being adopted by most large freight railroads threatens the safety and job security of members in the IBEW's railroad branch, and International President Lonnie R. Stephenson is appealing to the Transportation Department to take a closer look at the practice and its potentially dangerous outcomes.**

"We are seriously concerned about the long-term effects of 'precision scheduled railroading' on the rail workforce and on services as a whole," Stephenson wrote in an October letter to Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao. "We ask for robust analysis and monitoring of the safety of PSR operations."

PSR, which was first experimented with on the Canadian National railroad, is a business strategy that calls for consolidating rail services, cutting craft headcount by the hundreds and deferring equipment and facility maintenance, all in a rush to slash companies' operating ratios — that is, the difference between the amount of money a railroad makes and the amount it spends on operations.

In the U.S., CSX, Norfolk Southern and Union Pacific have been implementing PSR over the last 18 months, something the IBEW's Railroad Department believes is the continuation of a dangerous philosophical shift away from the freight rail industry's longstanding objectives.

"These railroads are pursuing profit at any cost, even when the effort seriously risks the safety of workers and the public at large and hurts customer service and jobs," said Al Russo, an international representative in that department. "Activist investors love this. It's lining their pockets at the expense of everyone else. PSR is reducing operating ratios from the 80% range to around 50%, but at what cost?"

With most large U.S. railroads actually reporting increases in net income and traffic between the first quarter of 2018 and the first quarter of 2019, "it makes PSR look like a shallow attempt to boost quarterly returns by cutting every available corner on labor, safety and service," Russo said.

In reality, he said, the railroads are using PSR as an excuse to lay off IBEW members and rail workers in other crafts at an alarming pace, leaving the employees lucky enough to have kept their jobs struggling to deal with heavier and longer trains, maintenance reductions and closed facilities.

“As the railroads are letting critical equipment degrade and deteriorate, many of our members are forced to work in the unsafe conditions that result,” said Jim Meyer, who also serves as an international representative in the Railroad Department. Managers are demanding that the shrunken workforce spread out to cover for vacancies, he said, which often means they are taking on tasks well outside of their craft and experience.

“Think about how scary that is,” Meyer said. “Workers from other trades are being ordered by management to perform electrical work that they are in no way trained for or qualified to do.”

Mandatory overtime is also on the rise, he said, and that’s more bad news for an industry that’s historically been plagued by reports of accidents brought on by chronic employee fatigue.

“And, of course, they aren’t allowed to refuse overtime or sign off on incomplete work, even on the grounds that doing so could risk their safety or the safety of other employees and the public,” Meyer said.

With workers frequently told to skip train maintenance or inspections in favor of rushing PSR-optimized trains into service, Russo worries about the repercussions as the depleted workforce tries to keep up with an increasingly demanding workload.

“Our members who are working on the front lines fully expect that workplace accidents, equipment breakdowns and even derailments will increase under PSR,” Russo said.

Rail customers, too, are feeling PSR’s effects. Consolidation of service locations is leading some railroads to refuse to service for some routes and shippers, including rural business customers for whom rail has been the sole freight transportation option for generations.

Some railroads, though, have yet to climb aboard the PSR bandwagon, Russo said. Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway is not ruling out deploying PSR in the future, but for now it is focusing on investing in and expanding its shipping business.

“BNSF seems to understand that it’s hard to cut service and still retain quality workers and paying customers,” he said.

To be clear, Stephenson said, the IBEW does not object to railroads’ pursuit of precision or profitability.

“What we fear is that, without some sort of oversight, railroads will continue to use PSR to trade safety for profits at the expense of workers and the public at large,” he said. “Our hope is that Secretary Chao and the DOT will take our letter to heart and step in to keep that from happening.”