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Mr. Martin J. Oberman
Chairman, Surface Transportation Board
395 E Street SW
Washington DC 20423

Dear Chairman Oberman,

You are in recent receipt of a letter from Mr. Michael Paul Lindsay II, a locomotive engineer working for Union Pacific Railroad. For the record, I am in 100 percent concurrence with Mr. Lindsay's position and the points he raises.

My name is Paul Schmidt. I have worked in BNSF Railway's signal department for 15 years, the past 10 years as a signal electronic technician in Seattle. As a signal ET, I am at the top rung in both signal technical expertise and base compensation for union-represented personnel.

In 2012, my assigned duties encompassed about 50 route miles inside and around BNSF's Seattle Terminal. Today, I cover nearly 100 route miles in and outside the Seattle Terminal. And with the advent of Positive Train Control, the amount of equipment I am personally responsible to maintain and be proficient with has doubled as well.

But have my wages increased proportionally? No, they have not. They have remained essentially static against the rising cost of living, especially in the Puget Sound region, as have the wages of all my colleagues in BNSF's signal department. And now, due to steep inflation, we are losing ground even faster. And yet BNSF, which is pumping millions of dollars every day of net income derived from record profits into the coffers of Berkshire Hathaway, wants to increase our pay by a miserly 2.5 percent annually and significantly increase our share of healthcare costs.

Moreover, even though our contract states that signal ETs are not in on-call positions, I have been recently threatened by signal management with abolishment of my job if I am not on call, even though I (and all of my colleagues -- ETs, signal inspectors and signal maintainers) are not paid to be on call. There is a caveat, however; we must by contract "protect" on weekends, for which we must be available from 6 a.m. Saturday to 6 a.m. Sunday. For that 24-hour requirement, we are paid only 8 hours straight time. For the remaining 16 hours that we are expected to be available, we receive nothing. I am essentially paid for about 2,350 hours straight time a year but expected to give almost 3,400 hours of additional service without compensation. No other industry in this country operates in that manner.

Four of the 10 people in my work group, including me, will turn age 60 this year. None of us has yet attained 30 years of service. Yet some like me are giving serious consideration to retiring at or just after age 62, regardless of our service years, just to get something of our Tier 2 retirement benefits and get away from BNSF. Sound Transit light rail is hiring signal maintainers at starting wages 30 percent higher than my current base rate. I'd leave BNSF today for light rail, but I would lose all my Tier 2 retirement benefits doing so. Thus, I am trapped for at least the next 27 months.

I used to look forward to coming to work every day. All that changed beginning seven years ago when spy cameras started being installed in our vehicles, coupled with the realization that I was consistently losing ground in wages, with the intimidation tactics used against me and others for not being on call, and of course giving away our quality of life by staying on call for free.

All this reinforces what Mr. Lindsay points out -- railroading is not the well-paying career it once was. The carriers treat us as expendable commodities, hiring and furloughing human beings as if we were merely locomotives or freight cars to be put into or taken out of service as traffic levels dictate.

This is largely why the carriers are short-handed. People like me and untold numbers of other railroaders have for several years now told our sons, daughters, neighbors and friends, "No, you really don't want to work for BNSF or any other Class 1 railroad you care to name." After several years of getting this message out, the effects are finally beginning to be felt, abetted by a hot labor market.

Greed drives everything the railroads do -- even "safety" initiatives. They don't care about us; they only care about not paying claims, not paying fair wages commensurate with our skills and risks involved in our work, not paying benefits, making us do less with more, and using intimidation to keep us available 24/7/365 without just compensation.

We've had a bellyful of this. We're tired and discouraged. Morale? That's just a word in the dictionary. Something needs to change. Perhaps reregulation, to include federally regulated compensation. Perhaps converting the carriers to quasi-public utilities charged with contributing to the nation's good rather than Warren Buffett's cash pile. Whatever the answer might be, something needs to change.

You and the STB can make a difference. We, and the nation, need you to do so.

Sincerely,

Paul Schmidt
Sequim WA