BLET National President Dennis R. Pierce testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation at a hearing titled, “Passenger and Freight Rail: The Current Status of the Rail Network and the Track Ahead.” Held on October 21, the hearing examined the current state of America’s passenger and freight rail network, including impacts of COVID-19, and legislative considerations for surface transportation reauthorization legislation.

President Pierce delivered the testimony in his capacity as President of the Teamsters Rail Conference. To address the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, President Pierce urged the Senate to adopt legislation that would improve the health, safety and sanitation standards for all railroad workers. President Pierce also testified about the negative impact of so-called Precision Scheduled Railroading (PSR) on railroad workers, communities and shippers. He described it as a dangerous, job-killing business model that puts lives at risk by putting profits ahead of safety. President Pierce concluded his testimony by urging the Senate to adopt legislation as part of the upcoming surface transportation reauthorization that would address PSR and return the rail industry to serving the public instead of Wall Street. Additionally, the surface transportation reauthorization should include rail safety legislation that would mandate two-person train crews, President Pierce said.

COVID’S IMPACT

President Pierce praised railroaders for answering the call as essential workers during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. However, he was critical of the industry for failing to recall furloughed workers as freight traffic has improved.

“I am pleased to report that the industry’s essential employees have answered the call and worked tirelessly to serve our economy. But our members have paid a heavy price. Record numbers of freight workers were furloughed when traffic cratered, on top of historic furloughs that occurred prior to the pandemic. Despite sharply rebounding traffic, recalls have been insufficient to meet demand,” President Pierce said.

Those lucky enough to avoid furlough have been forced to deal with unprecedented health and safety concerns.
BLET PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Fighting Together in 2021

In the first President's Message I wrote after becoming BLET National President in 2010, I recognized and honored my father who was part of the “Greatest Generation”. December 5, 2020 would have been my Dad’s 100th birthday and, as I looked back on what he must have seen while he was still living, I was drawn to the last line in my first message about him. In comparing the Greatest Generation’s fight to ours, I closed the piece by saying, “Participation, teamwork and solidarity are the keys, and success is achievable only if we make this our common fight.” Nothing could be truer today, especially as 2020, a year like no other, comes to a close.

When 2020 began, we knew there would be a Presidential election, but we did not know that our Nation would be ravaged by a pandemic. In fact, most of us had never heard of COVID-19 back in January. As we look back now, over 300,000 Americans have lost their lives to the pandemic, and while Americans may have differing views on causes and solutions, there is no doubt that it continues to impact the lives of all working class Americans. The pandemic also impacted the Presidential election in many ways, but that election took place regardless of the pandemic. In the days before writing this Message, the Electoral College certified the election results, confirming that Joe Biden, also known as “Amtrak Joe,” will be our next President. President-elect Biden spent years commuting by Amtrak each day between his home in Delaware and his office in Washington, D.C. During that time he developed an understanding of passenger and commuter rail operations, as well as an appreciation for the men and women who work for Amtrak. President-elect Biden is also a strong supporter of the Union movement, and as I have often said, working class Americans do better in the workplace when we have government officials who are not afraid to say the word UNION!

With the election in the rear view mirror and the inauguration ahead of us, I am convinced that we must approach 2021 with a spirit of hope for a better America for working class Americans. I am convinced that engineers and trainmen, along with all rail workers, are better positioned to improve on workplace issues in 2021 than they have been for some time. But this is where the message from 2010 that I referenced above remains true: as my father’s generation did, now is the time for us all as BLET members to join in solidarity. We must turn our focus back to the workplace issues that affect us all. More importantly, we must also put aside those issues that may have separated us in the past, and instead concentrate our collective efforts on the big issues that affect our future. First and foremost in 2021, the BLET is engaged in national negotiations for a new contract for the Nation’s freight rail members. While I have little expectation that the Carriers’ outrageous demands, and will ultimately have an impact on the outcome of our negotiations.

Without a doubt, one of the most important items in this round of negotiations is the issue of two-person crews. I am proud to say that our Brotherhood stands shoulder to shoulder with our Brothers and Sisters in SMART’s Transportation Division in the fight to preserve two-person crews. Be it on the legislative front, in court, or at the bargaining table, BLET is working with SMART-TD to protect the interests of all operating employees. Along with crew size, meaningful wage increases and preservation of our health and welfare benefits must also be part of any settlement in this round of negotiations. While our goal has always been that we reach a voluntary agreement that the membership will ratify, the prospect of a Presidential Emergency Board as one of the Rail Labor Act’s final steps in the bargaining process, and its potential outcome has most certainly changed with a new Administration set to take Office. In addition to our negotiations, we must reinforce our legislative and regulatory efforts in 2021. The safety of all rail workers, and the general public, is dramatically impacted by the actions, or inactions, of both State and Federal legislators and regulators. We must return to a place where the Nation’s safety regulators do their mandated job to ensure a safe workplace, and we will not rest until that is accomplished.

As I said at the start of this Message, our success in all of our goals is directly tied to our solidarity. I will say it again: we must put aside the issues that may have divided us in the political cycle, and instead focus on the workplace issues that we have in common. We must not allow the Rail Carriers to divide us with their efforts to blame our Unions when they mistreat their employees.

We must remember that anyone who attacks your Union is attacking you and your family’s livelihood. In our case, Rail Carriers have used the political allies, is “more for them, less for you.” If there was ever a time for you to be more involved in your Union’s efforts, that time is now. I am counting on you to stand with your Union to advance the BLET’s agenda in 2021 and beyond, because our strength is in our solidarity.

DENNIS R. PIERCE
BLET NATIONAL PRESIDENT
Unions Are Even More Essential in the Time of COVID-19

Workers are facing unprecedented challenges in the age of the coronavirus. Many have lost their jobs, been temporarily laid off with no idea when they are going to return or been forced to work despite the ongoing health crisis. It has been a stressful time for millions across the country. But instead of letting anxiety over an uncertain future get the best of them, many workers are choosing to get organized. Hardworking Americans, even those toiling in sectors that have traditionally not been union-friendly, are recognizing the value that comes from membership. As a result, they struggle to get proper personal protective equipment and sanitized workspaces, they understand that coming together with co-workers can have benefits. Even before COVID-19 took hold across the nation, union membership was on the rise. A 2019 poll by Gallup found 44 percent of Americans approved of unions, the highest level since 2003. Why, you may ask? Because in an age of growing income inequality, more and more people understand that when workers organize, they get better pay, benefits and working conditions. The median union worker makes $10,000 more annually than the median non-union worker. They are also more likely to receive health insurance and retirement benefits and work in a safer workplace. At a time when there is so much at risk, joining the labor movement offers some proven results.

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Lambert elected General Chairman of UP-Eastern District GCA

C had M. Lambert, a member of the BLET National Division 364 (Wichita, Kan.), was elected General Chairman of the Union Pacific-Eastern District General Committee of Adjustment at the GCA’s quadrennial meeting on August 11, 2020.

A third-generation railroader, Brother Lambert first joined the BLET on October 1, 1999. He has served BLET Division 364 as Local Chairman for 10 years. Immediately prior to his election to the General Chairman’s office, Brother Lambert was serving the GCA as its full-time 1st Vice Chairman.

Also elected during the quadrennial meeting were: 1st Vice Chairman Brian S. McCoy, Division 183 (Omaha, Neb.); 2nd Vice Chairman Dan E. O’Neil, Division 224 (Marysville, Kan.); 3rd Vice Chairman Travis D. Kuenneng, Division 388 (North Platte, Neb.); Secretary-Treasurer Stacey L. Madsen, Division 88 (North Platte, Neb.); and Alternate Secretary-Treasurer Charles (Clint) Grady, Division 115 (Guthrie, Wis.).

Representing the BLET National Division at the meeting were: National President Dennis R. Pierce; and National Vice President Mark L. Wallace.

"Congratulations to Brother Lambert and all officers of the Union Pacific-Eastern District GCA. I thank them for their willingness to serve our Brotherhood, and I have every confidence that Brother Lambert will do an excellent job as General Chairman.”

— President Dennis Pierce

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— President Dennis Pierce
PSR: A JOB-KILLING BUSINESS MODEL

President Pierce also condemned Pre-
cision Scheduled Railroading, the job-
ning business model that has been im-
plemented by American railroads.

"PSR is a business model that re-
winds Wall Street at the expense of every-
one else. PSR’s across-the-board and ruth-
less cost-cutting has produced histori-

cally high unemployment rates. Be-

tween 2014 and 2019 — long before CO-
VID — employment on the four largest


class railroads was cut 17%, with nearly

30,000 jobs lost," Pierce said. "America needs a railroad industry that balances rail 

operations, shipper needs, effective main-
tenance, safety, employee and manpower 

costs, and the industry’s long-term health.

PSR has cut much deeper than just 

eliminating fat; it has cut into muscle and 

bone. PSR may be good for the bottom

line, but it is bad for the nation’s shippers,

American consumers, and the workers 

who move the nation’s freight.”

Not only is it a job killer, PSR puts prof-

its ahead of safety and puts railroad work-

ers and America’s cities and towns at risk.

"PSR has led to deferred maintenance 

on yards and repair shops — a constant state of chaos as op-

erating crew bases are relocated to reduce the number of crews needed for long-
distance trains — and 2 to 3-mile-long trains 

becoming the norm. Trains are routine-


dy operated at unsafe speeds, often with 

no adequate time for the crew to ac-

complete mandated cuts, railroad unem-

ployment and sickness benefits will result 

in a further reduction of 7.65 percent. Ap-

plying the sequestration reduction rate

of 5.7 percent, down from the current 5.9 percent 

reduction, as required by law. The adjusted re-

duction amount is based on revised projections 

for benefit claims and payments under the Rail-

road Unemployment and Sickness benefit program.

The current daily benefit rate for both un-

employment and sickness is $80.00. Applying 

the sequestration reduction rate, the daily 

benefit rate for both unemployment and 

sickness will result in a maximum 2-week 

benefit reduction of $696.69.

In fiscal year 2019, the BBB paid about $1.3 
billion in retirement and survivor benefits to about 

3.0 million beneficiaries, and net unemployment-

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Pacific Harbor Line and BLET sign new agreement

Pacific Harbor Line, Inc. (PHL) and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) have signed a new five-year labor agreement. The contract, effective September 20, governs rates of pay, benefits and work rules for 150 of PHL’s 189 employees.

In a joint announcement, PHL-BLET said, “The new agreement includes wage increases, a matching 401(k) savings plan, a signing bonus, and no increases in employee health and welfare contributions for the life of the contract.”

The contract was ratified on September 4 by a majority of the BLET’s PHL members, and signed September 15 at PHL’s offices in Wilmington, Calif. BLET’s Division 214 in Long Beach, Calif., has represented PHL’s employees since the railroad was formed in 1998. Subsequently, union employment has grown from 27 employees to more than 150 today. For contract negotiations, Division 214 is represented by the BLET’s Union Pacific-Western Lines General Committee of Adjustment (UP-WL GCA).

PHL President Otis Clatt II said, “The year 2020 will be remembered for the vast array of negatively impactful events that weigh heavily on the minds of employees, staff, customers and myself. Yet, it’s exciting to share this positive announcement during otherwise troubled times.”

The BLET negotiating team was led by Union Pacific-Western Lines/PHL General Chairman Brian P. Carr and Division 214 Local Chairman Jose L. Covarrubias, with assistance from National Vice President Mark Wallace.

“Although it took more than one attempt, the BLET negotiating team was able to reach an agreement that was ratified by the membership,” BLET National President Dennis R. Pierce said. “I thank the membership for their solidarity and perseverance throughout the negotiating process. I also thank General Chairman Carr for bringing these negotiations to a successful conclusion.”

The Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles welcomed the new contract, which will enhance the railroad network and ensure the fluid movement of cargo in the harbor.

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Brother Paul E. Pearson of BLET Division 133 (Denver, Colo.) was reelected by acclamation to his second term as Chairman of the BLET National Legislative Board at its seventh quadrennial meeting on September 24, 2020, following the service of former Secretary-Treasurer: Willie E. Tilsworth, Division 130 (Kansas City, Kan.); 2nd Vice Chairman: Jordan Lucero, Division 505 (La Junta, Colo.); Elected by acclamation to serve as Truste...
BLET’s John Tolman retires

VINCE Verna is New Vice President & National Legislative Representative

Vice President Tolman’s railroad career began in 1971 shortly after he graduated from high school. He hired out as a helper at Beacon Yard in Boston and earned promotion to locomotive engineer in 1974. Brother Tolman is a second-generation railroader and union leader, following in the footsteps of his father, who was a General Chairman with the United Transportation Union for many years. Brother Tolman operated passenger and freight trains during the first 25 years of his railroad career, working for the Penn Central Railroad, Conn. & Boston and Maine Railroad, MB&;G, and Amtrak. Brother Tolman also made time to earn both a Bachelor’s degree in Marketing and a Master’s degree in Business Administration while working full-time for the railroad.

Brother Tolman joined the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers on March 1, 1980. He served in several Division offices, and in 1992 helped to create the BLET’s Massachusetts State Legislative Board, subsequently being elected as its first Chairman. It was as Chairman of the Massachusetts SLB that he began fighting for the humane treatment of train crew members who were involved in critical incidents, a legacy that helped forge national standards for railroad worker critical incident stress relief. In 1996, Brother Tolman was hired by the BLET International Division as a Special Representative. Brother John, his wife Chris and their three children, Caroline, Johanna, and free to Boston to the Cleveland area. Just prior to being hired by the BLET, he also served on the Democratic City Committee in Melrose, Mass., and was elected to serve on the Board of Aldermen for the city. During his 10 years with the BLET International and BLET National Division Office (1996-2006), Tolman managed many different roles, including Organizing, Education & Training Coordinator, Coordinator of the Safety Task Force, Chief of Staff, and Political Director. In 2006, Brother Tolman was elected to the office of Vice President and National Legislative Representative. He was subsequently reelected to the position of Vice President at the BLET National Convention in 2010, 2014 and 2018.

In the past 14 years as Vice President and National Legislative Representative, Vice President Tolman has accomplished many new things to improve the quality of life for BLET members and all railroaders throughout the United States. During his tenure, he logged more than a thousand hours in Congressional offices, lobbying alongside BLET National Division officers, General Chairman, State Legislative Board Chairmen, Division officers, and rank-and-file members.

For the past 14 years, Brother John Tolman’s service as Vice President and National Legislative Representative has placed the BLET at the forefront of Rail Labor’s legislative efforts in our nation’s capital. Pierre said, “His leadership President Dennis R. Pierce said. “I think it is much more accurate to say that his unique style cannot be duplicated. However, Brother Verna has had many years to learn the territory under Brother Tolman’s mentorship, including as Chairman of the BLET’s high level of legislative leadership that has been established during John Tolman’s remarkable tenure as Vice President and National Legislative Representative.” The BLET Bylaws dictate the order of succession in filling vacancies on the Advisory Board, including when a National Division Officer retires. Having won election by acclamation to the office of First Alternate Vice President & National Legislative Representative at the BLET’s Fourth National Convention in 2008, Brother Tolman will automatically fill the office vacated by Brother Tolman’s retirement. Verna has worked out of the BLET’s National Legislative Office for the past nine years, having served as Director of Regulatory Affairs since August 1, 2011.

Vice President Tolman also has testified before the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate more than a dozen times regarding railroad worker safety, Amtrak funding, Positive Train Control, and other issues of importance to BLET members. Working to assist various State Legislative Board Chairmen, Brother Tolman’s office has helped introduce various legislation across the country at the state and local level, including the recent passage of two-person crew bills in numerous states. He has consistently worked in the successful effort to still national right-to-work laws that have been proposed in the House and Senate, and has lobbied for steady Amtrak funding, which has been successful but challenging at times. He has met with each President and Vice President of the United States since 2007, except for the current administration, having met with not only Vice Presidents Pence. Among the major pieces of legislation passed during his tenure include whistleblower protections for railroad workers in 2007 and the Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008. He has been a vocal advocate for changes in FRA regulations. Among the major pieces of legislation passed during his tenure include whistleblower protections for railroad workers in 2007 and the Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008. He has been a vocal advocate for changes in FRA regulations. Among the major pieces of legislation passed during his tenure include whistleblower protections for railroad workers in 2007 and the Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008. He has been a vocal advocate for changes in FRA regulations.

Brother Verna also began serving as Chairman of the Arizona State legislative Board in 2008, a position he was reelected to in 2009. He was elected to the position of Director of Regulatory Affairs by Brother Tolman.

In his role as Director of Regulatory Affairs, Verna represented the BLET in numerous railroad safety and human factors endeavors, such as the Rail Safety Advisory Committee (RSAC) of the Federal Railroad Administration. He also represented the interests of BLET members in regulatory matters before the Department of Transportation, the National Transportation Safety Board, the Transportation Research Board, and among others agencies and organizations. He also helped the union’s responses to various agencies’ proposals for rulemakings and proposed rules, prepared and presented responses to petitions for waiver from compliance with FRA regulations.

Brother Verna is proud to be a second-generation railroader. His father worked as a conductor with the Penn Central and the Southern Pacific Railroad, MBCR, and Amtrak. Brother Tolman graduated from California State University at San Bernardino (1994) and a Master’s De-
Members can view RRB pre-retirement seminar information online

The office of the Labor Member is pleased to announce that our Pre-Retirement Seminar presentation is now available to view online. We designed this program to help educate those nearing retirement about the benefits available to them, and how they can expect during the application process. This popular program has become a valuable resource to RRB customers and employers alike. It helps promote a better understanding of our benefit programs among the railroad community, and in turn, improves the effectiveness of our in-person educational programs.

While we typically conduct several seminars across the country annually, we were forced to cancel all in-person events this year due to the COVID-19 outbreak. This provided us with the unique opportunity to reimagine our platform, form capabilities and prioritize creating a web version of the seminar.

To access the video online, visit www.rrb.gov/PRS and click on View Pre-Retirement Seminar Presentation. Because we cover several topics and aspects of railroad retirement, we have divided these parts into bite-sized chunks. Each part is self-contained and can be viewed on its own. If you complete all the webinars, the entire presentation is over an hour long. View shorter segments of the program by selecting a seminar topic on the same web page. Available topics include: Retired Employee and Spouse Benefits, Spouse Annuity, Working After Retirement, Survivor Benefits, and Benefits Affecting All Retirement and Survivor Benefits.

At this time, unemployment and sickness benefits are not covered in the program because of the ongoing uncertainty of additional federal stimulus packages.

We recommend viewing www.rrb.gov/coronavirus for the most up-to-date information.

Creating a web-based platform for our educational programming is made possible with your long-standing partnership. In these challenging times we appreciate your support in promoting this valuable program.