ON THE RIGHT TRACK:
2021 TRIENNIAL ELECTION MANUAL NOW ONLINE

The 2021 edition of “On the Right Track,” the Local Division nomination and election procedure manual, is now available for download from the Members’ Area of the BLET website and, for those Officers who have access, the document is also accessible in the Document Library in UnionTrack.

Triennial elections for all BLET Divisions will be held this year, beginning with nominations at each Division’s first regular meeting in September. The “On the Right Track” election manual will assist the officers whose responsibility it is to oversee the election process, as well as the members who have an interest in running for office.

If you are a Division Secretary-Treasurer, you also serve as an election official for your Division and in the coming days will receive a package of election-related materials from the National Division. Updated copies of the Notice of Nominations and the Nominating Form are now available in the Document Library in UnionTrack.

Because determinations of eligibility to run for office may involve an interpretation of the BLET Bylaws, any eligibility questions must be submitted, in writing and via a signed letter, to National President Dennis R. Pierce.

A username and password must be used for logging into the Members’ Area of the BLET National Division website to download the 2021 edition of “On the Right Track” (PDF). It is available here: https://www.ble-t.org/members/OnTheRightTrack.asp

If you are a BLET member and you do not have a username and password, you can sign up for one here: www.ble-t.org/signup.asp

Coronavirus relief package to benefit railroad workers

The American Rescue Plan, the sweeping COVID-19 relief package signed into law by President Joe Biden on March 11, contains several railroad-specific provisions that will benefit BLET members.

The new law allocates $30 billion for transit costs, including $1.7 billion for Amtrak to restore 12 long distance routes to full service and to recall and pay 1,200 Amtrak employees who were furloughed because of the pandemic. Congress made the recall of furloughed employees and the resumption of full service a condition of funding.

“Approximately 400 BLET members will be brought back to work thanks to the American Rescue Plan,” BLET National President Dennis R. Pierce said. “Resumption of full daily service will provide a benefit to the traveling public and will also provide a boost to the American economy.”

The new law provides various improvements and additional funding for the Railroad Retirement Board. The 7-day waiting period for Railroad Unemployment Insurance Act (RUIA) benefits has been waived, and enhanced benefits under RUIA have been extended to September 6, 2021. The RRB will receive $23.2 million for improvements to its Information Technology initiatives and $6.8 million to hire additional staff to administer RUIA benefits.

“The Railroad Retirement Board is an important asset for all railroad workers, and the additional funding provided by the American Rescue Plan will help to strengthen the services and benefits our members receive,” President Pierce said.
Workers’ Memorial Day 2021

When official interpretations are made they have virtual question(s) are addressed, and ensures that places for all workers. Must do on this day, while never eing. And mourning is what we the world now mark April 28 as ment. Trade unionists around a similar remembrance estab - ministration, and is the date of oCcupational Safety and Health Ad-

The BLET website, you will find our Memorial Page (www.ble-t.org/memorial.asp). There we recognize our BLET Brothers and Sisters who have lost their lives in the line of duty. On this somber day, I ask you to join me in taking a moment to remember these Brothers and Sisters, as well as all railroaders and other work er who have been killed or in - jured on the job in the past year. This is the second Workers’ Memorial Day that has come to pass during the COVID-19 pan demic. Our nation’s essential workers have been on the front lines battling this virus and put ting their lives at risk to keep our nation safe, often without the personal protective equipment necessary to insure their own safety. Our locomotive engineers and trainmen are among these essential workers, moving the freight and the passengers nec esary to keep the lifeblood of America flowing. Tragically, we have lost some of our members to the virus over the past 12 months. I am proud to salute our freight railroad members, who move the products that stock the shelves at our nation’s grocery stores and haul the heavy bulk commodi ties that keep the lights on. In many large cities, our passenger commuter railroads operate the trains that are the primary means of transportation for key medical personnel who are leading the charge against the coronavirus in our nation’s hospitals.

In recognition of Workers’ Me morial Day, I urge you to take a moment to remember those who have been killed or injured on the job in the past year. I would also ask that you get involved with your union and become active and aware. Educate yourself about the issues in Washington D.C., that impact your job and your safety and join us in our fight to improve workplace safety for all American workers.

Dennis R. Pierce
BLET national President

BLET, NEW JERSEY TRANSIT CONTRACT TALKS IN FEDERAL MEDIATION

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET), a Division of the Teamsters Rail Conference, is being assisted by a federal mediator from the National Mediation Board (NMB) in contr - negations with the NJ Transit Corporation (NJT), pursuant to Section 5, First, of the Railway Labor Act. The current round of contract negotiations be - gan when the BLET filed its Section 6 notice on Oc - tober 1, 2019. In spite of its good faith efforts to secure a satisfactory voluntary settlement, the BLET neg - tering team has deemed the Carrier’s posi - tion to be unacceptable. Negotiations on behalf of BLET are under the direction of Jim Brown, General Chairman of the BLET’s NJT General Committee of Adjustment. The union represents approximately 475 NJT locomo - tive engineers.

“I am disappointed to have to go down this road again,” General Chairman Brown said. “After the last round of negotiations, which took over five years and was finally settled in 2016 after two Presidential Emergency Boards and just hours be - fore a strike, I had hoped that the carrier would join us in working towards a voluntary settlement that would fairly address the needs of both sides, but that has not happened. While the membership has worked the front lines during this ongoing global pandemic, dutifully fulfilling their essential work - er responsibilities, the carrier representatives have refused to start any meaningful contact talks. We hope that involvement of the NMB will cause the NJT to refocus on addressing the legitimate needs of the professional men and women who safely move the public daily across three states.” Updates will be provided as developments war - rant.

NEVADA GOVERNOR HONORS AMERICA’S RAILROADERS

neva Governor Steve Sisolak has issued a proclamation praising America’s railroad workers, declaring Wednesday, April 28, 2021, as “A Day in Honor of Railroad Workers.” A portion of the proclamation reads: “The safe and efficient movement of the trains transporting... freight and... passengers through Nevada is due foremost to the dedication and professionalism of those employees who are directly involved in train movements, including Train and Crew Dispatchers, Maintenance of Way personnel, Signal Maintain - ers, Mechanics, and train crews.” The BLET Nevada State Legislative Board and the SMART Transportation Division Nevada Leg - islative Board worked jointly to lobby Governor Sisolak regarding the proclamation. The two Boards “needed a joint statement, which reads in part: “Every day, front-line railroad workers report for duty as required and perform the tasks of their jobs in a manner which ensures that the movement of freight and passengers by rail which is needed to keep this nation’s economy functioning is accom - plished. In spite of various objectives and circum - stances which create hurdles to be crossed in pro - viding this vital service, the work which you do continues to deliver for those counting on it... On this special day, we salute and thank you for the work that you do, while encouraging you to stay focused on safety in the course of your work. We also ask that you join us in remembering those work - ers who have passed on before us, some in the line of duty, while committing to continue fighting for all sall among us with whom we share struggles.” BLET National President Dennis R. Pierce and SMART-TD President Jeremy R. Ferguson said, “Our unions thank Governor Sisolak for honoring rail - roaders with this proclamation and for recogniz - ing the important role BLET and SMART-TD mem - bers play in keeping our economy strong. We also thank Matt Parker, BLET Nevada State Legislative Board Chairman, and Jason Doering, SMART-TD Nevada State Legislative Director, for their efforts in helping to secure this proclamation and for their dedication to railroad safety.”

A copy of Governor Sisolak’s proclamation can be found here (PDF): www.ble-t.org/pr/pdf/Nevada_Proclamation.pdf

BLET NATIONAL DIVISION ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Official communications between BLET members and the National Division require a hard copy of the correspon - dence, bearing a signature, being received by the National President to be considered an “official communication.” This is to provide that the ac - tual question(s) are addressed, and ensures that when official interpretations are made they have reference to a specific request and can be used in future correspondence. The volume of e-mails received makes it im - possible for the National President to answer all unofficial communications. Therefore, it is the policy of the BLET that e-mails addressed to the National President will be reviewed and forward - ed to the appropriate officer or staff for a timely response; however, an e-mail message is not consid - ered an official communication. Moreover, anonymous e-mails and e-mails that do not provide sufficient information con - cerning the sender to enable National Division staff to confirm the sender’s membership status will not receive any reply or acknowledgement. This policy is intended to allow the National President to be aware of the opinions and sug - ggestions of the membership, while at the same time providing a timely response to the mem - ber’s unofficial communication, if a response is necessary, without needlessly expending limit - ed BLET resources.

Adopted at Cleveland, Ohio on July 23, 2000. R-08
The Teamsters are a strong supporter of President Biden’s newly-unveiled American Jobs Plan (AJP) that offers a broad vision for putting the nation’s economy on a 21st century path towards better paying jobs that lift up U.S. workers. Now what it needs is bipartisan support to move it through Congress quickly.

The proposal introduced in late March will promote job creation and enact worker protections. The administration’s commitment to modernizing the nation’s aging infrastructure will create good-paying jobs that will revitalize the middle class for working Americans. It’s a goal that lawmakers across parties have previously supported.

While the U.S. is the wealthiest country in the world, it ranks 13th when it comes to the overall quality of infrastructure. After decades of disinvestment, the nation’s transportation network is crumbling. The American Jobs Plan will modernize our roads, bridges, ports, airports, rail and transit systems — all critical parts of America’s supply chain. Teamsters work each day in every part of this supply chain and know firsthand that our transportation infrastructure has been neglected for too long.

That’s not all the legislation aims to reform. The White House’s push for Congress to enact the Protecting the Right to Organize Act as a key piece of the AJP is another sign that President Biden is fulfilling his promise to reform labor law and empower millions of workers looking for a voice on the job. It also focuses on innovation in a new economy that will create hundreds of thousands of quality jobs now. American workers will build and make things in every part of this country, and they will be trained for well-paying, middle-class, union jobs.

The Biden administration has spent time since the unveiling of the AJP trying to drum up bipartisan support. But too many Republicans are thinking of the 2022 election instead of doing what’s right for working people. Lawmakers were elected to improve the lives of hardworking Americans. It’s time to drop the political games and do what’s right for those just trying to earn an honest living.

Congress, it’s time to back the AJP!

Fraternally,
JAMES P. HOFFA
Teamsters General President

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**American Jobs Plan Will Grow the Middle Class**

Update from Railroad Retirement Board’s Labor Member regarding American Rescue Plan Act of 2021

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**SOFAD Report for Nov. 2020: Three Switching Fatalities in 90 Days**

The Switching Operations Fatality Analysis (SOFAD) Working Group has published its most recent Safety Alert, reminding workers to remain vigilant in light of three switching fatalities in the 90 day period from August to November.

As a cross-industry collaboration for over 20 years, the SOFA Working Group has identified the Possible Contributing Factors for more than 210 switching operations fatalities since 1992. The SOFA Working Group reports its findings and emerging data trends with the goal of zero fatalities in the railroad industry.

The three fatalities occurred in Cressett, AR (August 12); Richmond, VA (October 17); and Torrino, IL (November 11). According to SOFA’s November 2020 Safety Alert: “While these recent cases have not yet been analyzed, the SOFA Working Group is concerned by the 159 injuries that occurred this year through August 21, 2020 and reminds all employees to remain vigilant during switching operations by not only protecting the above movement, but also protecting themselves by avoiding close or no clearance hazards. Lost, but not least, remember to always hold a job briefing whenever the job or situation changes.”

The SOFA Group issues regular Safety Alerts to help achieve its goal of eliminating switching injuries and fatalities. The group was formed in February of 1998 at the request of the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) to review switching operations accident reports and to develop recommendations for reducing fatalities and injuries. The BLET is a part of the SOFA Working Group, along with representatives from the FRA, Association of American Railroads (AAR), American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association of America (ASLRRA), SMART-Transportation Division, and the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Volpe Center. The BLET’s representatives are Vice President & National Legislative Representative Vince Veneri, Washington State Legislative Board Chairman Shavainment Allen, Arkansas State Legislative Board Chairman Wayne Denson, and New Mexico State Legislative Board Chairman Eric Gabaldon.

SOFAD also noted its in November 2020 Safety Alert that 1 in 4 switching operations fatalities is due to a close or no clearance. The report provides instructions on how to avoid such potentially deadly situations. To download a PDF of SOFA’s November 2020 Safety Alert, visit: www.blet.org/pdf/SOFA_Safety_Alar, 2020-11.pdf

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**GENERAL PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE**

BY JAMES P. HOFFA

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**Locomotive Research & Training News**

MARCH-MAY 2021
Under the Railroad Retirement Act (RRA), a "current connection with the railroad industry" is one of the eligibility requirements for both regular retirement annuities and supplemental annuities payable by the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB). It is also a factor in determining whether the RRB or the Social Security Administration is currently employed by Keolis Corporation. Prior to the end of the 30-month period, the employee's current connection is determined under the RRA and became effective October 1, 1981. It only covers employees still living on that date who left the railroad industry on or after October 1, 1975, or who were on leave of absence, on furlough, or absent due to injury on October 1, 1975.

How is a current connection determined under the Railroad Retirement Act?

To meet the current connection requirement, an employee must generally have been credited with railroad service in at least 12 months immediately preceding the month his or her railroad retirement annuity begins. If the employee died before retirement, railroad service at least 12 months in the 30 months before the month of death will meet the current connection requirement for the purpose of paying such benefits.

However, if an employee does not qualify on this basis, but has 12 months of railroad service in an earlier 30-month period, he or she may still meet the current connection requirement. This alternative generally applies if the employee did not have any regular employment outside the railroad industry after the end of the last 30-month period which included 12 months of railroad service, and before the month the annuity begins or the month of death if earlier.

Once a current connection is established at the time the railroad retirement annuity begins, an employee cannot lose it, no matter what kind of work is performed thereafter.

Can nonrailroad work before retirement break a former railroad employee's current connection? Yes. Full or part-time work for a nonrailroad employer in the interval between the end of the last 30-month period in which an employee worked in his or her railroad service and the month an employee's annuity begins, or the month of death if earlier, can break a current connection, even with minimal earnings.

Self-employment in an unincorporated business will not break a current connection. However, if the business is incorporated the individual is considered to be an employee of the corporation, and such self-employment can break a current connection. All self-employment will be reviewed to determine if it meets the RRA's standards for maintaining a current connection.

Federal employment with the Department of Transportation, National Transportation Safety Board, Surface Transportation Board, National Mediation Board, Railroad Retirement Board, or Transportation Security Administration does not break a current connection. State employment with the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority will not break a current connection. Service employed by the Alaska Railroad, as long as that railroad remains an entity of the State of Alaska, will not break a current connection. Also, railroad service in Canada for a Canadian railroad will neither break nor preserve a current connection.

Is there an exception to these normal procedures for determining a current connection? Yes. A current connection can also be "deemed" for purposes of a survivor or supplemental annuity if the employee completed 25 years of railroad service, was involuntarily terminated without fault from his or her last job in the railroad industry, and did not thereafter decline an offer of employment in the same class or craft in the railroad industry regardless of the distance to the new position. (A "deemed" current connection does not satisfy the current connection requirement for an occupational disability.)

If all of these requirements are met, an employee may be considered to have a "deemed" current connection, even if the employee works in nonrailroad employment after the 30-month period and before retirement or death. This exception to the normal current connection requirement was established by amendments to the RRA and became effective October 1, 1981. It only covers employees still living on that date who left the railroad industry on or after October 1, 1975, or who were on leave of absence, on furlough, or absent due to injury on October 1, 1975.

Would accepting a buy-out affect an employee's ability to maintain a current connection under this exception? Generally, in cases where an employee has no option to remain in the service of his or her railroad employer, the termination of the employment is considered involuntary, regardless of whether or not the employee receives a buy-out. However, if an employee has the choice of either accepting a buy-out in the same class or craft in the railroad industry or terminating with a buy-out, accepting the buy-out is a part of his or her voluntary termination, and the employee would not maintain a current connection under the exception.

An employee with 25 years of service is offered a buy-out with the option of either taking payment in a lump sum or of receiving monthly payments until retirement age. Could the method of payment affect the employee's current connection under the exception?

No. The determining factor for whether the exception applies when a buy-out is paid is whether or not the employee stopped working involuntarily - not the payment option. The employee must always relinquish job rights to accept the buy-out, regardless of whether it is paid in a lump sum or in monthly payments. Neither payment option extends the 30-month period.
The BLET is pleased to announce the resumption of its regional meeting program with meetings in Austin, Texas, (July 12-16) and Nashville, Tennessee (August 2-6). CDC guidelines regarding COVID-19 protocols will be strictly enforced to protect the health and safety of everyone in attendance.

For the Austin meeting, guests will stay at the Hilton Austin (500 East 4th St., Austin, Texas 78701, telephone: (512) 482-8000). BLET convention registration as well as hotel registration can be made through the BLET’s regional meeting website, http://bletregionals.org. In Nashville, guests will stay at the Grand Hyatt Nashville (1000 Broadway, Nashville, TN 37203, telephone: (720) 272-5819).

BLET and both hotels are taking a number of precautions to help you enjoy your visit to Austin, while at the same time ensuring that we comply with CDC, local and Hilton and Hyatt corporate policies and regulations regarding COVID-19 precautions.

While these policies and regulations may change, the wearing of facial masks is currently required in the common areas of the hotels and at many of the restaurants on and off the property.

The BLET and Hilton Austin/Grand Hyatt Nashville have arranged to have social distance style seating at the open and closed meetings, and during meals and training classes to help minimize any issues or concerns. If you have any specific questions, please email them to: regionalmeeting@blet.org. You can review additional information and a video from the hotel at http://bletregionals.org.

Please visit the BLET website, Facebook page, and http://bletregionals.org for the latest information.

REGISTRATION NOW OPEN!

2021 BLET REGIONAL MEETINGS

AUSTIN, TEXAS
JULY 12-16
HILTON AUSTIN

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE
AUGUST 2-6
GRAND HYATT NASHVILLE

For more information visit us online at: BLETREGIONALS.ORG

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Transportation workers protecting each other since 1910
RRB plans improved access to toll-free service

The U.S. Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) has developed two changes to the agency’s nationwide toll-free telephone number system to better meet the needs of its customers, improving customers’ access to agency staff and services. The changes took effect on February 15, 2021.

To address lengthy wait times for callers on our toll free number (877-772-5772), the RRB is adding a virtual hold function and increasing our total hours of availability beginning with the week of February 15, 2021. Starting February 15, rather than staying on the phone until a representative becomes available, callers will be able to request a callback when their place in line comes up. When choosing this option, callers will be asked to confirm their phone number and record their name. The system will then tell them approximately how long it will take for them to receive a callback.

At the time the return call is placed, the person answering the phone will be able to accept the call, request a brief delay while the original caller comes to the phone, or reschedule the call for a later time. This approach will result in more efficient service by RRB representatives, and will allow customers to avoid long hold times.

In conjunction with implementing the virtual hold feature, the RRB will also be increasing the number of hours per week during which claims representatives will be available to answer calls.

Going forward, the hours during which the toll-free number will accept calls will change to 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. each business day, including Wednesdays.

Customers also have other options that are available 24 hours a day to obtain select services without the need to talk to an agency representative. By calling 877-772-5772 and using the automated menus or visiting myRRB, the following information and services are available:

- Letters verifying income and monthly benefit rates
- Service and compensation statement
- Replacement Medicare card
- Duplicate tax statement (1099, 1099-R)
- General benefit information
- RRB field office addresses

In addition, railroad employees who have established myRRB accounts can login and complete the following actions:

- Check for and claim unemployment benefits
- Claim sickness benefits
- Check the status of their unemployment or sickness benefit claims
- View their railroad service and compensation history
- Get an estimate of retirement benefits

Customers also have the option of sending a secure message to their local office by accessing the Field Office Locator (https://rrb.gov/Field-Office-Locator) and clicking on the link at the bottom of their servicing office’s page.

Allen reelected to third term as Washington SLB Chairman

Brother Shahraim C. Allen was reelected by acclamation to his third term as Washington State Legislative Board Chairman on December 10, 2020. Brother Allen is a third-generation railroader and a member of BLET Division 238 (Tacoma, Wash.). In 1994, he hired out as a switchman for the Burlington Northern, earning promotion to locomotive engineer on December 20, 1995. Brother Allen joined the Brotherhood on June 1, 2001. He was first elected to the position of Chairman of the Washington State Legislative Board at its quadrennial meeting in 2011, and then reelected by acclamation at its 2016 quadrennial meeting.

Also elected were: 1st Vice Chairman Dylan D. Elkins, Division 443 (Spokane, Wash.); 2nd Vice Chairman Dave M. Beech, Division 518 (Seattle, Wash.); Secretary-Treasurer Tristin DeYoung, Division 238 (Tacoma, Wash.); and Alternate Secretary-Treasurer Dylan D. Elkins, Division 443 (Spokane, Wash.). Elected to serve as Trustees were: Allan D. Mazzotta, Division 577 (Washington, D.C.); David A. Burt, Division 518 (Seattle, Wash.); and Dave M. Beech, Division 518 (Seattle, Wash.).

The newly elected BLET National Division at the meeting were: BLET National President Dennis R. Pierce; Vice President and National Legislative Representative Vincent G. Verna; Director of Political and Legislative Affairs Robert F. Hagan; and Administrative Assistant to the National Legislative Office Charles Barrett Sr.

Additional BLET guests included: Retired BLET Vice President and National Legislative Representative John Tolman; General Chairman Steve Leyshon; UP, Western Region GCA; Arkansas State Legislative Board Chairman (SLBC) Wayne Denison; California SLBC Ryan Snow; Colorado SLBC Paul Pearson; Florida SLBC Brendan Sullivan; Georgia SLBC Dwayne Massengale; Indiana SLBC Shane Hubbard; Iowa SLBC Michael Walker; Louisiana SLBC Richard Barnett; Maryland SLBC Dave Dinges; Missouri SLBC Calvin Groose; Montana SLBC D.B. Kenner; Nebraska SLBC Pat Pfeifer; New Mexico SLBC Eric Gabaldon; Texas SLBC Gary Pedegg; Utah SLBC Scott Weeks; Virginia SLBC Tim Craver; and Wisconsin SLBC Chuck Schulz. Brother Hubbard, who also chairs the National Association of State Legislative Board Chairmen, served as Parliamentarian during the meeting.

Additional guests included: Washington State Senator Patty Kuderer (48th District); Washington State Representative Bruce Chandler (15th District); Washington State Treasurer Mike Pellicciotti (former Representative, 30th District); former Washington State Representative Art Want (27th District); Washington State Representative Mari Leavitt (28th District); and Drumfire Public Affairs Vice President Sam Jeffers.

“I congratulate Brother Shahraim and all officers of the Washington State Legislative Board, and I thank them for their willingness to serve our Brotherhood,” BLET National President Dennis R. Pierce said. “Under Brother Shahraim’s leadership, the Board has helped secure passage of important safety legislation that has improved the quality of life for BLET members living and working in Washington State.”

– President Dennis Pierce

BLET members ratify new contract with Pan Am Railways

Members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) have ratified a new collective bargaining agreement with Pan Am Railways.

The three-year agreement contains no work rule or health & welfare changes. Members will receive general wage increases of 2 percent at the beginning of February 2021, and NS) and more than 20 regional and short line railroads. It is headquartered in North Billerica, Massachusetts.
Employers and employees covered by the Railroad Retirement Act pay higher retirement taxes than those covered by the Social Security Act. As a result, railroad retirement benefits are higher than social security benefits, especially for “career” employees (those employees who have 30 or more years of service).

The following questions and answers show the differences in railroad retirement and social security benefits payable at the close of the fiscal year ending September 30, 2020. They also show the differences in age requirements and pay-roll taxes under the two systems.

1. How do the average monthly railroad retirement and social security benefits paid to retired employees and spouses compare?

The average annuity being paid by the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) at the end of fiscal year 2020 to career rail employees was $3,735 a month, and for all railroad employees, the average was $2,985. The average age retirement benefit being paid under social security was approximately $1,505 a month.

Spouse benefits averaged $1,000 a month under railroad retirement compared to $765 under social security.

The Railroad Retirement Act also provides supplemental railroad retirement annuities of between $23 and $43 a month, which are payable to employees with railroad service prior to October 1981 who retire directly from the railroad industry with 25 or more years of service.

2. Are the benefits awarded to recent retirees generally greater than the benefits payable to those who retired years ago?

Yes, because recent awards are based on higher average earnings. Age annuities awarded to career railroad employees retiring in fiscal year 2020 averaged about $4,370 a month while monthly benefits awarded to workers retiring at full retirement age under social security averaged nearly $2,070. If a spouse benefit is added, the combined benefits for the employee and spouse would total $6,115 with railroad retirement coverage, compared to $3,105 under social security.

Adding a supplemental annuity to the railroad family’s benefit increases average total benefits for current career rail retirees to about $6,135 a month.

3. How much are the disability benefits currently awarded?

Disabled railroad workers retiring directly from the railroad industry in fiscal year 2020 were awarded $3,160 a month on average while awards for disabled workers under social security averaged $2,070.

While both the Railroad Retirement and Social Security Acts provide benefits to workers who are totally disabled for a regular work-related disability, the Railroad Retirement Act also provides disability benefits specifically for employees who are disabled for any reason other than railroad occupation. Employees may be eligible for such an occupational disability annuity at age 60 with 10 years of service, or at any age with 20 years of service.

4. Can railroaders receive benefits at earlier ages than workers under social security?

Railroad employees with 30 or more years of creditable service are eligible for regular annuities based on age and service; the first full month they are age 60, and railroad employees with less than 30 years of creditable service are eligible for regular annuities based on age and service; the first full month they are age 62.

No early retirement reduction applies if a railroad employee retires at age 60 or older with 30 years of service and his or her retirement is after 2001, or if the employee retired before 2002 at age 62 or older with 30 years of service.

Early retirement reductions are otherwise applied to annuities awarded before full retirement age (the age at which an employee can receive full benefits with no reduction for early retirement). Full retirement age is age 66 for those born 1943 through 1954 and is gradually rising to age 67 for those born in 1966 or later, the same as under social security.

Under social security, a worker cannot begin receiving retirement benefits based on age until age 62, regardless of how long he or she worked, and social security retirement benefits are reduced for retirement prior to full retirement age regardless of years of coverage.

5. Can the spouse of a railroad employee receive a benefit at an earlier age than the spouse of a worker under social security?

If a retired railroad employee with 30 or more years of service is age 60, the employee’s spouse is also eligible for an annuity the first full month the spouse is age 60. The spouse of a worker under social security is not eligible for a spouse benefit based on age until both the worker and the spouse are at least age 62. Regardless of the age of the spouses, under both retirement systems are eligible if the worker is retired and the spouse is caring for a qualifying child.

6. Does social security offer any benefits that are not available under railroad retirement?

Social security does pay certain types of benefits that are not available under railroad retirement. For example, social security provides children’s benefits when an employee is disabled, retired or deceased, whereas the RRB only pays children’s benefit if the employee is deceased.

However, the Railroad Retirement Act includes a special minimum guaranty provision which ensures that railroad families will not receive less in monthly benefits than they would have if railroad earnings were covered by social security rather than railroad retirement laws. This guaranty is intended to cover situations in which one or more members of a family would otherwise be eligible for a type of social security benefit that is not provided under the Railroad Retirement Act.

Therefore, if a retired railroad employee has children who would otherwise be eligible for a benefit under social security, the employee’s annuity can be increased to reflect what social security would pay the family.

7. How much are monthly benefits for survivors under railroad retirement and social security?

Survivor benefits are generally higher if payable by the RRB rather than social security. At the end of fiscal year 2020, the average annuity being paid to all aged and disabled widow(er)s was $1,825 a month, compared to $1,380 under social security.

Benefits awarded by the RRB in fiscal year 2020 to aged and disabled widow(er)s of railroaded averaged about $2,340 a month, compared to approximately $1,355 under social security.

The annuities being paid at the end of fiscal year 2020 to widowed mothers/fathers and children’s annuities averaged $1,195, compared to $1,030 and $900 a month for widow/mother/fathers and children, respectively, under social security.

Those awarded in fiscal year 2020 averaged $1,780 a month for widowed mothers/fathers and $1,345 a month for children under railroad retirement, compared to $1,015 and $905 for widowed mothers/fathers and children, respectively, under social security.

8. How do railroad retirement and social security lump-sum death benefit provisions differ?

Both the railroad retirement and social security systems provide a lump-sum death benefit. The railroad retirement lump-sum benefit is generally payable only if survivor annuities are not immediately due upon an employee’s death. The social security lump-sum benefit may be payable regardless of whether monthly benefits are also due. Both railroad retirement and social security provide a lump-sum benefit of $255. However, if a railroad employee completed 10 years of creditable railroad service before 1975, the average monthly retirement lump-sum benefit payable is $1,030. Also, if an employee had less than 10 years of service, but had at least 5 years of such service after 1965, he or she would have to have had an insured status under social security law (counting both railroad and social security credits) in order for the $255 lump-sum benefit to be payable.

The social security lump sum is generally only payable to the widow(er) living with the employee at the time of death. Under railroad retirement, if the employee had 10 years of service before 1975, and was not survived by a living widow(er), the lump sum may be paid to the funeral home or the payer of the funeral expenses.

9. How do railroad retirement and social security payroll taxes compare?

Railroad retirement payroll taxes, like railroad retirement benefits, are calculated on a two-tier basis. Railroad employees and employers pay taxes at the same rate as social security taxes, 7.65 percent, consisting of 6.20 percent for retirement on earnings up to $142,800 in 2021, and 1.45 percent for Medicare hospital insurance on all earnings. In addition, an additional 0.9 percent in Medicare taxes (2.35 percent in total) will be withheld from employees on earnings above $200,000.

In addition, rail employees and employers both pay tier II taxes which are used to finance railroad retirement benefit payments over and above social security benefits. In 2021, the tier II tax rate on earnings up to $106,200 is 4.9 percent for employees and 13.1 percent for employers.

10. How much are regular railroad retirement taxes for an employee earning $142,800 in 2021 compared to social security taxes?

The maximum amount of regular railroad retirement taxes that an employee earning $142,800 can pay in 2021 is $16,128, compared to $10,924.20 under social security. For railroad employees, the maximum annual regular retirement tax is on earnings up to $142,800 and is $24,836.40, compared to $10,924.20 under social security. Employers, who pay 13.1 percent of payroll taxes, will pay more in retirement taxes than the above amounts because the Medicare hospital insurance tax is applied to all earnings, so
n March 2, the Brother- now of the BLET En- gineers and Trainmen (BLET) applied to the Na- tional Mediation Board (NMB) for the assignment of a feder- al mediator to assist in contract nego- tiations with the Long Island Railroad (LIRR), pursuant to Section 5, First, of the Railway Labor Act. The current round of contract nego- tiations began when the BLET filed its bargaining session, NCCC-CBG. The BLET negotiating team has deemed the carrier’s tactics to be unacceptable. Negotiations on behalf of the BLET are under the direction of Kevin Sexton, General Chairman of the BLET’s LIRR General Commit- te of Adjustment. The union repre- sentatives of the LIRR and more than 500 LIRR loco- motive engineers. The union’s representation in an ongoing labor dispute with the LIRR, and the performance of our duties in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, is of the utmost importance to the BLET. This dispute is a critical issue that needs to be resolved in a fair and equitable manner. The BLET is committed to working with the LIRR and other parties involved to ensure that the needs of the members are met and the rights of all parties are protected. The BLET seeks mediation in LIRR contact talks.

Are you a photographer? The National Division's BLET Publications Committee invites all BLET members volunteering to contribute their images to the "Photo of the Month" section of the News-letter each month. If you would like to submit a photo for consideration, you may call Editor John Bentley at (216) 241-2630, ext. 248, or you can email Bentley@ibile.org.

Please note only high resolution images can be used. Members are also encouraged to review their employer’s policies regarding the use of cameras and other electronic devices while on duty.

MARCH-MAY 2021

Advisory Board January/February 2021 Activity

In accordance with the BLET Bylaws, summaries of BLET Advisory Board members’ activities are published monthly:

BLET seeks mediation in LIRR contract talks. The union’s representation in an ongoing labor dispute with the LIRR, and the performance of our duties in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, is of the utmost importance to the BLET. This dispute is a critical issue that needs to be resolved in a fair and equitable manner. The BLET is committed to working with the LIRR and other parties involved to ensure that the needs of the members are met and the rights of all parties are protected. The BLET is committed to working with the LIRR and other parties involved to ensure that the needs of the members are met and the rights of all parties are protected.

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