

News from the

National Association of Railroad Passengers

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September 1997

9

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## Amtrak Closer to a Strike

### Whether—and How—Congress Steps In Will Be Crucial

An October 22 strike against Amtrak that also would cripple many commuter railroad operations is possible, but unlikely. The Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWE) originally threatened to strike Amtrak September 5. They want Amtrak to implement pay levels of the major freight railroads, levels Amtrak says it cannot afford.

President Clinton, to his credit and in the face of harsh union criticism, on August 21 named a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) to examine the dispute. He said: "A strike on Amtrak would have an adverse effect on the traveling public and would severely hamper freight rail shipments."

The PEB recommendations released September 22 supported the BMWE on future pay raises unrelated to productivity and on a lump sum payment to "make up" for workers only getting cost-of-living pay increases in the two years since the contract expired. (Under the Railway Labor Act, an expired contract remains in force until replaced with a new one, or until the parties have the right to "self help," that is, the union to strike and management to impose a new contract.)

Coming from a PEB appointed by a Democratic president, this is not surprising. Yet this same Clinton Administration in 1994 told Amtrak to be operating-subsidy-free by 2002. Amtrak estimates "over \$250 million" as the three-year cost of extending to all employees the freight-railroad settlement wages the PEB recommended here.

Amtrak Chairman Tom Downs said, "The [PEB's] recommendations assume that by simply making Congress aware

#### LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

Three principal legislative issues are still ahead for rail passengers—the first two absolutely critical to the survival of trains through fiscal 1998:

- **Appropriations**—A House-Senate conference on HR 2169 (1998 transportation funding bill) had not finished at press time. The Senate numbers for Amtrak operations and "mandatory payments" (\$343 million total) must prevail over the House numbers (\$283 million). The House's \$60 million gap—beyond the Senate figures \$44 million below Amtrak's needs—would cripple the Amtrak system (more in Aug. News).

- **Reauthorization**—The House (HR 2247) and Senate (S 738) bills still had not gotten floor votes by press time. Reauthorization must become law for Amtrak to benefit from the \$2.3 billion in capital funding in the budget agreement (more in Aug. News).

- **ISTEA renewal**—The Senate bill, S 1173, would give states the option of spending some of their federal transportation money on intercity passenger trains. The House bill, HR 2400, is silent on intercity passenger rail. S 1173 awaits a floor vote; HR 2400 is still in committee.

of the costs of a generous settlement, Congress will provide the funding. In fact, Congress is well aware of Amtrak's financial needs and has been insisting on reforms to allow for reduced costs...Our finances are such that we simply cannot sign a contract we cannot pay for."

The dedication of most Amtrak employees to their jobs is

(continued on page 3)

## Amtrak Tells "Surf Board": Express is Essential

Amtrak's attempt to save the long-distance trains by reuniting them with express cargo revenues—preferably in business partnerships with the freight railroads (Apr. News)—has met with intense opposition from Union Pacific (UP).

Therefore, on September 15, Amtrak applied to the Surface Transportation Board (STB)—successor to the Interstate Commerce Commission—for establishment of a "schedule leading to...entry of an...order determining that Amtrak's transport of express traffic is necessary to carry out the purposes of" the Rail Passenger Service Act, which established Amtrak.

Amtrak also sought an interim order requiring UP to continue to handle Amtrak trains and their express while the STB considers Amtrak's request. Amtrak said it must have the right during the interim period "to operate up to 600 feet of express cars (approximately 8 cars)" per train.

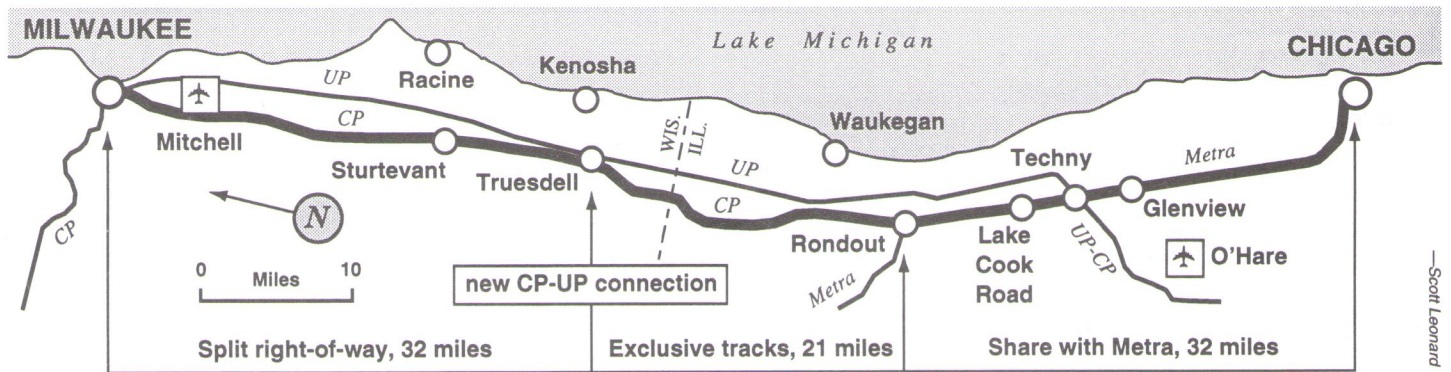
The "Amtrak law" does not define express and UP believes

this law "does not give Amtrak the right to transport carload or truckload-sized shipments" or some types of cargo Amtrak is carrying.

Amtrak believes UP's position is "not supported by Board decisions or historical precedent" and says "these important issues can only be resolved on the basis of a complete record."

Amtrak's application says express revenues "are an essential component of Amtrak's plan to address its financial problems in both the short and long term." Amtrak notes "an immediate and particular concern": increasing express revenues to support operation of the *Texas Eagle* beyond September 30, the date through which the train was covered by a \$5.6 million loan from the State of Texas.

Amtrak asked the STB to set October 31 as the deadline for filing opening evidentiary submissions and argument and December 15 for filing replies. ■



## Hiawathas at 110 mph Would be “Self-Supporting”

The Wisconsin and Illinois DOTs released in May their final report on a five-year effort to study high-speed rail service in the 85-mile Chicago-Milwaukee corridor. The results of the study will be integrated into two other, on-going efforts—the nine-state Midwest Rail Initiative (Oct. '96 News) and the Wisconsin-Minnesota High Speed Rail Corridor Study (Sept. '91 News; a new feasibility study began in June).

The report favors the current Amtrak route (former Milwaukee Road, owned by CP Rail and Metra), with diesel-electric trains (at least at first) with no tilt technology (unless service were extended beyond the relatively straight corridor). Twelve daily round trips would run up to 110 mph, on tracks separated from freight traffic. The current 92-minute travel time would be reduced to 60. Service could start in 2003.

Current intermediate stops at Sturtevant and Glenview would be kept. Other scenarios considered for higher speeds and frequencies included the possibility of replacing Glenview (which has a fine station building opened in 1995, but limited parking) with Lake Cook Road (a recently opened Metra station with much more parking), and adding a stop at General Mitchell International Airport, just south of Milwaukee (with alternating trains still stopping at Sturtevant).

Capital costs would be \$472 million (1995 dollars), of which \$49 million is for rolling stock. Much of the rest is related to unusual track arrangements and right-of-way acquisitions. Working south from Milwaukee, the report envisions passenger trains using one-half of the two-track CP Rail right-of-way for 32 miles to Truesdell. There, CP freight trains would swing east to the Union Pacific (former Chicago and North Western) “New Line” (which also would have to be improved), sharing it with UP freight trains 31 miles south to Techny (where most CP freight trains currently leave the passenger route). A connection would be built at Truesdell, where the two lines are within sight of each other.

From Truesdell south to Rondout, 21 miles, high-speed

trains would have the two-track right-of-way to themselves. Rondout is the junction with Metra’s Fox Lake commuter line and the start of Metra ownership. The remaining line into Chicago, to be shared by commuter and high-speed trains, would need improvements.

This arrangement would separate freight and passenger traffic, but 35 miles of single track could present operational challenges for the high-speed service.

The report estimated that operating revenues in 2003 (\$30 million in 1995 dollars) would exceed annual operating and maintenance costs (\$19 million). Ridership would be 990,000, compared to 320,000 on Amtrak *Hiawathas* in 1996 (379,000 in 1995). About half of the growth represents traffic diverted from highways, principally parallel I-94. Of course, ridership and revenues are projected to grow in following years.

The report said that while revenues would cover operations and rolling stock acquisition, it would not cover infrastructure costs. Therefore, models for public-private financing were considered. Potential sources of federal funding were considered to be minimal, given past appropriations history for non-Northeast Corridor high-speed programs, and the federal budget situation. [An indirect source of federal funding would open up if, as part of the current ISTEA-renewal effort, states were given the right to spend some of their federal transportation funds on intercity passenger rail projects.]

A 1996 Federal Railroad Administration report (Sept. '96 News) found that upgrading “Chicago Hub” services (to Milwaukee, O’Hare Airport, Detroit and St. Louis) to 110-mph service had the best ratio of total benefits to total costs of all improvement options.

The information in the Chicago-Milwaukee report should benefit the efforts of the nine-state Midwest Rail Initiative, whose work we hope represents the multi-state cooperation necessary to bring long needed passenger rail investments (private, state and federal) to the region. ■

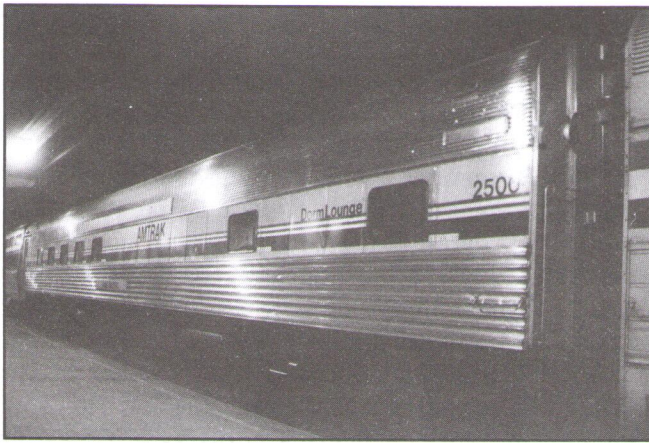
### INTERMODAL CRUISING—AIR, RAIL AND SHIP

Amtrak has a new “Cruise Rail” program with Carnival Cruise Lines and United Airlines, combining the three travel modes into one package. Travelers can take a train to a port city, get transportation to the pier, cruise around for a few days, and return by air or rail. Packages connect Los Angeles, New Orleans, Miami, Tampa, Port Canaveral and Vancouver with places like Mexico, Alaska, and the Caribbean. Call 800/321-8684 or a travel agent for a brochure (or visit Amtrak’s web site, <<http://www.amtrak.com>>).

### THANKS, DAVE!

NARP was fortunate to have as a volunteer intern this summer David Johnson of Newport News, VA, now a sophomore at the University of Maryland. Dave helped out on several fronts, including making legislative contacts, attending hearings, and supplying information to communities with Amtrak service. He is also the student member of the Amtrak Citizens Advisory Committee.

## TEST SINGLE-LEVEL SMOKING LOUNGE



—Michael L. Shermetta

Separately ventilated smoking lounges—now popular on routes with bi-level Superliner equipment—may be coming to single-level long distance routes. Amtrak converted an old Heritage sleeper (used as a crew dormitory car) into a prototype dorm-lounge this spring. Lounges on trains with the “new” car are more pleasant for smokers and non-smokers alike.

The dorm-lounge, built in 1950 as the “Pine Brook” for the Santa Fe, is shown above on the *Crescent* at Charlotte on July 2. The car’s ten roomettes remain as crew space, but the end four bedrooms (A through D) were converted into the smoking lounge (in the photo, the nearest two windows are on the aisle side). The other two bedrooms (E and F), nearer the center of the car, were fitted with shower and storage space.

## Strike Threat

(from page 1)

impressive. Above-cost-of-living pay increases *tied to productivity enhancements* clearly are in order.

The PEB says it must be “guided by the standard of people receiving comparable pay for comparable work.” But pay differentials exist in many industries. Freight railroads are prosperous (and, in some types of markets, near-monopoly status) and commuter railroads often are perceived as vital to the functioning of major metropolitan areas. Indeed, in 1995, a Republican governor told management to yield to labor in a big Metro-North Commuter Railroad labor dispute.

By contrast, intercity passenger rail has many competitors who often have substantially lower costs.

Under the law, if the parties do not reach agreement by October 22, they become free to resort to self help. In such cases, Congress usually imposes a settlement.

Here, the union is the party seeking a big, immediate change and hoping Congress will do nothing. Thus, any strike likely would come after the adjournment of Congress (now projected for early November), when legislation forcing strikers back to work would take longer to produce.

Anticipating this, Congress may act to prevent a post-adjournment strike. It is important that Congress show a greater awareness of economic reality than did the PEB. ■

## AMTRAK AWARD FOR POST-BLIZZARD WORK

Amtrak and the Bozell Sawyer Miller Group received the CIPRA (Creativity in Public Relations Award) sponsored by *Inside PR* magazine. They were recognized for the “Peter, Paul and Mary Blizzard Reunion Tour,” held three weeks after the early-1996 Northeastern blizzard to promote Amtrak’s success in keeping passenger trains running during that emergency.

“TAKE THE TRAIN? OH, IF ONLY WE COULD!”

*From the July 28 Roanoke [VA] Times, where there is no passenger train service (see Jan. '96 News):*

“...The selection of readers’ responses published on today’s Commentary is informative. In most of those printed, and in nearly all of some 60 others we didn’t have room for, Southwest Virginians offer not just nostalgic yearnings for a transportation mode of the past but sound arguments why passenger trains are needed now and for the future.”

—editorial

“Yes, I would use the [train] service. I cringe each time I think about a long trip on the interstate, jockeying for position with the large trucks and drivers who make driving a strategy game to see who can overtake the most pieces (vehicles) in the least amount of time without getting zapped by the mother ship (police).

“By having convenient passenger service, I would be able to visit family and friends in a more relaxed manner, and more often. Now I tend to delay trips because of the drive...”

—Mary Powers, Salem, VA

“Would we be comfortable with old-fashioned seats all facing forward or two and two facing each other, with a tremendously large old-fashioned picture window, perhaps even an observation car? Nah!

“Give us an airplane seat with no room for our knees and two people next to us who must be disturbed if we have to visit the comfortable washroom.

“Maybe you would like to be in your automobile for hours on end, with your eyes glued to the yellow line, covering in front of that 18-wheeler touching your bumper and then giving you the Klaxon. Good for you. Don’t take the passenger train...”

“The government underwrites construction of airports, bridges and roads. Why can’t they do the same with tracks for the railroads?”

—Frank Klein, Salem, VA

“DELICIOUS MEALS FOR HUNDREDS DAILY”

“Disasters are rare, but [Amtrak dining car Chef Louis] Hughes’ ability to turn a problem into a triumph is legendary, and compliments spur him to try even harder.

“...It’s the waiters, not the passengers, who are my own personal customers,” he declared. “If I can present a dish that the waiters are proud to serve to the passengers, everyone is happy...”

—NARP Director Doras Briggs, in a long and interesting feature story in the *Martinez (CA) News-Gazette*, July 1

## TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

**UP Meltdown**—Amtrak's *Texas Eagle* and *Sunset Limited* in recent months regularly have had some of the worst delays ever. Some trips reached their final terminals 10 and 11 hours late. Union Pacific, whose freight service also has been disrupted, cites flood-related line closures, a surge in freight traffic, a back-up at the Mexican border and the fact that UP and Southern Pacific operations have not yet been merged in Texas nor merger-related capital investments made.

**October 26 Amtrak timetable**—the *California Zephyr* will be cut back from Oakland to Emeryville, CA (bus transfer point for San Francisco) to accommodate increased express shipments. The *Texas Eagle* will have its running time increased for the same reason.

**Southwest Chief**—Began service to Mendota, IL, August 9, upon completion of station renovation.

**Transit:** Maryland Mass Transit Administration opened a 4.5-mile extension of the Baltimore light rail system, Timonium-Hunt Valley, September 9.

SEPTA's R2 commuter line was extended (weekdays) 12 miles from Wilmington to Newark, DE (home of University of Delaware), September 2.

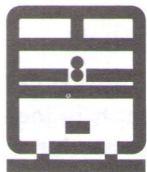
Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority on September 29 begins service on two of three planned "Old Colony" commuter rail lines, closed by the New Haven Railroad in 1959. Weekday peak trips link South Station with Middleboro and Kingston; off-peak trips start in late November (along with a short extension from near Kingston into Plymouth).

## "EXPLORE AMERICA" FARE REGIONS CHANGED

Amtrak has instituted its Explore America excursion fares for the fall, with a change in region boundaries (see maps). The fall fares will be sold through November 15 for use through December 18 (except for Thanksgiving black-out, November 25-30). The fares are \$168 for one region (except \$68 within the new Florida region), \$218 for two adjacent regions, and \$278 for three or four regions.

Besides the new Florida region, another change is the shifting

east of the boundary between the Central and Eastern regions. There are some winners and losers in this—some trips that were one-region trips are now two (i.e., New York-Florida, Chicago-East Coast), and some that were two-region trips are now one (Detroit-Denver, Atlanta-Texas). All travel from Florida to the Central region is counted as two regions, not three (and from Florida to the Western region is counted as three, not four).



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