The BLET exists to promote and protect the rights, interests, and safety of its members through solidarity, aggressive representation, and education.

BLET WEEKLY NEWS RECAP

July 31, 2026

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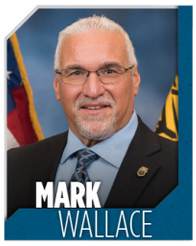
BORDER WITH MEXICO:

BLET hails FRA action to tighten safety regulations for train crews entering U.S. from Mexico

On July 30, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) released a Notice of Proposed Rule Making (NPRM) designed to raise standards on the Class I railroads' use of foreign train crews operating trains across the Southern Border into the United States. This proposed rule change, when finalized, will protect American jobs as well as enhance rail safety and security on the American border.



Protecting rail jobs and border security has been a top priority for BLET National President **Mark Wallace**. After becoming BLET President in May 2025, Wallace personally investigated the railroads' use of foreign train crews during border visits in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, and meetings with BLET members who work along the U.S./Mexico border.

"Trains originating from Mexico, operated by foreign crews were unable to communicate with dispatchers in English and the language barrier posed a hazard in the event of a derailment or other incident," said President Wallace. "Our investigation also revealed reports of the smuggling of narcotics and human trafficking by foreign crews. For too long, the rail security, public safety, and workforce issues along our southern border did not receive the attention they demanded. BLET and the Teamsters refused to accept the status quo. Together, we brought these concerns directly to policymakers and worked to make them a national priority."

A key provision of FRA's proposed new rule states: "Imposing both the ELP (English Language Proficiency) requirement and the 10 route-mile limitation at the southern border is appropriate and consistent with railroad safety, because railroad crews must be able to communicate fully and accurately when crossing into the United States, most notably with dispatchers and emergency responders during a crisis, as a safety-critical function. FRA has determined that the ELP requirement alone is not sufficient at the southern border to ensure safe operations in the United States and is therefore also proposing to impose the explicit 10 route-mile limit."

Outreach by President Wallace combined with union members reaching out to their Congressional representatives led to the DOT toughening English language requirements for foreign train crews operating along the Southern Border in December 2025.

"It's important to note that we have received broad bipartisan support in Congress on this issue from champions like Representatives Chris Pappas and Lance Gooden and Senators Ruben Gallego and Bernie Moreno and we hope to pass related legislation. In April, the Protecting American Railroad Workers Jobs Act of 2026 (H.R. 8468) was introduced by Representatives Chris Pappas (D-New Hampshire) and Lance Gooden (R-Texas)."

President Wallace concluded: "I want to thank President Donald J. Trump, Vice President J.D. Vance, U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, and FRA Administrator David Fink for their leadership in standing with BLET members to strengthen border security, enhance public safety, and protect American railroad jobs.

"I also want to thank Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien for his unwavering support of the Teamsters Rail Conference and BLET throughout this effort. His leadership and commitment to protecting Teamster railroad jobs helped ensure these issues received the attention they deserved."

THIRD TIME IS NOT THE CHARM:
Latest merger filing with the STB again shows that UP takeover of NS clearly is not in the public interest; U.S. Senators also voice concern

Here we go — again. This week, Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern filed a third round of merger application materials with the Surface Transportation Board (STB) in their attempt to merge the two Class I railroads. Back in May, the two railroads were ordered by STB to provide supplemental information by July 27 because there were so many holes in their first two merger applications.

"UP's actions keep confirming our assessment that this merger is bad for workers, customers, and our communities," said BLET National President **Mark Wallace**, who also serves as President of the Teamsters Rail Conference. The Teamsters represent the majority of the unionized workforce at what would be the combined railroad.

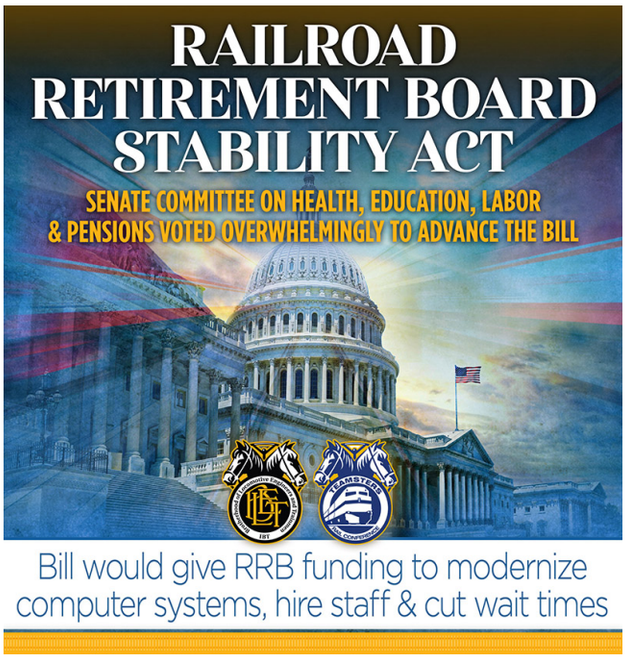
The railroads were also forced by BLET and other unions to disclose data showing how the merger would impact their workers. A preliminary analysis by Axios, a political and business news website, shows that the railroads project 1,000+ job cuts and 500+ transfers as a result of the deal. It's unclear where or how far workers would be transferred.

The BLET and Teamsters Rail Conference are founding members of the Stop the Rail Merger Coalition, which represents shippers, railroads, labor unions, consumers, and public policy groups. The Coalition has led the way in highlighting the dangers of the proposed merger. For more information, please read this press release from the Stop The Rail Merger coalition.

Members of Congress are also voicing concerns about the risks the merger poses to America's economy and supply chain. Earlier this month, U.S. Senator Cory Booker, joined by 22 Senate colleagues, urged the STB to conduct a rigorous and independent review of proposed merger. In a letter to the STB, the senators warned that the unprecedented merger could eliminate rail jobs, raise costs for shippers and consumers, reduce competitive options, create supply-chain bottlenecks, and undermine rail safety and service.

Locomotive photos by Cory Rusch, BLET Division 659

CAPITOL HILL:
Commonsense reform for Railroad Retirement finds common cause between Democrats and Republicans, labor and management



The long wait BLET members and other railroaders must endure to receive earned retirement benefits may soon be over. On July 30, the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) voted 22-0 to advance the bipartisan Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) Stability Act of 2026 (S. 4965), which would give the RRB the long-term funding it needs to better serve railroad workers.

BLET and the Teamsters Rail Conference have led the way in advocating for passage of the bill. BLET and the Rail Conference lobbied as part of a labor-management coalition including the Association of American Railroads; Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO (TTD); and American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association.

The labor-management group outlined its position in a letter to Sens. Bill Cassidy (R-LA) and Bernie Sanders (I-VT), who introduced the legislation on July 14, along with Sens. Jim Banks (R-IN) and Tim Kaine (D-VA).

"This legislation will revolutionize the RRB's ability to serve rail workers,"

said **Mark Wallace**, who serves as the National President of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen and as President of the Teamsters Rail Conference. “With the passage of this legislation, the RRB will be able to spend a small percentage of the taxes it collects from railroad workers and the railroads and use it to administer the benefits our members and other railroaders have earned while still ensuring Congressional oversight of the RRB. Now that it has passed through the Senate HELP Committee, BLET strongly urges Congress to enact this legislation so that the RRB can fully serve railroaders and their families. We want to thank and recognize Chairman Cassidy and Ranking Member Sanders and their staffs for their leadership and support on this vital issue and look forward to working with them to make this legislation law.”

Years of chronic underfunding have left RRB with outdated computer systems and starkly reduced staffing levels that have hindered its important work. Among other issues, workers must wait on average over 440 days for an initial adjudication of applications for RRB disability benefits if they are injured on the job.

In 2001, Congress created the National Railroad Retirement Investment Trust to invest on behalf of the RRB and its trust funds. Since then, the Trust’s assets — provided by payroll taxes paid by rail workers and employers — have continued to grow, making the railroad retirement system self-sustaining. Yet, under current law — and despite large revenues from the Trust — Congress annually caps the amount of funding the RRB can use from its own resources for administrative expenses. The bill would switch to a formula system to provide a predictable funding stream allocated from its own trust fund while maintaining Congressional oversight. The bill would also allow for targeted funding in the first five years to ensure that RRB completes a full transition from its legacy operating systems to a new, more efficient system.

The bill now moves to the full Senate for a vote. The BLET and Rail Conference will continue to advocate for the bill so it can become law by the end of the year.

Click here for more information.

Senators Bill Cassidy (left) and Bernie Sanders, who introduced the legislation on July 14, seen here at the July 30 HELP Committee hearing. *U.S. Senate HELP Committee images*

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING UPDATE:
BLET reaches tentative agreement with Illinois Railway

Eligible Illinois Railway members who have not received a ballot by August 5 should call the National Division. *Photo by Danny Higgins*

Ballots were mailed this week to BLET members regarding a tentative five-year agreement with the Illinois Railway (IR). If ratified by the members, the tentative contract would provide full retroactive pay from March of 2025, a $1,000 signing bonus, and general wage increases over the life of the agreement, which would run through the year 2029. Also, the TA would establish a $250.00 per quarter attendance bonus. There are no concessions in the tentative agreement.

The negotiating team consisted of General Chairman **Dan Wells**, Vice General

Chairman **Dustin Stadie**, National Vice President **Randy Fannon**, and recently-retired National Vice President **Pete Semenek**. A subsidiary of OmniTRAX, the IR operates over 113 miles of track in north central Illinois and provides rail service to some of the largest sand mining operations in the United States.

Note to IR members: Ballots will be tabulated on August 14. Members who are

eligible to vote and have not received a ratification packet by August 5 should call the National Division's dedicated voicemail line at (216) 241-2630, ext. 222. When connected with the voicemail, please leave the following information:

- Your name, address and phone number;
- The division to which you belong;
- The railroad you work for;
- Your date of birth;
- The last four digits of your Social Security number; and
- Your email address.

All replacement ballots will be distributed by email. Any member who requires a replacement ballot must include their email address in the voicemail; otherwise, they will not be able to participate in the ratification vote.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE:
Rhode Island governor signs BLET-backed two-person crew bill

The Rhode Island State House, where BLET members spent significant time educating the state's legislators about much-need rail safety reform.

Rhode Island Governor Dan McKee signed a BLET-backed two-person crew bill into law on July 23. The bill reads in part: "No train or light engine used in connection with the movement of freight may be operated unless it has a crew consisting of at least two persons."

The bill was led in the General Assembly by State Representative Matthew Dawson (D-District 65) and State Senator Lammis Vargas (D-District 28). "Requiring two crew members on a train carrying freight is a commonsense safety measure," said Governor McKee.

Brother **Dan Cadogan**, Chairman of the BLET's New England State Legislative Board, has worked on this bill since at least 2024, when a similar measure unanimously passed the State Senate but ultimately was not signed into law. Cadogan thanked Governor McKee, Representative Dawson, and Senator Vargas for their leadership on this important rail safety legislation.

Rhode Island becomes the 14th state to have a crew-size law on the books, joining Virginia, New Jersey, New York, Kansas, Ohio, California, Wisconsin, Arizona, West Virginia, Minnesota, Washington, Nevada, and Colorado.

CHICAGO:
Expanded programming set for next month's Eastern Regional Meeting

Registration is still available for the BLET's Eastern Regional Meeting in Chicago in August. As with the Western Regional Meeting in New Orleans earlier this month, the Chicago regional meeting will offer expanded programming in addition to the slate of traditional educational classes.

The Chicago meeting will take place at the Drake Hotel from August 24-28. Registration is open for meals and events, and members can register online or in person at the Drake as late as Tuesday morning, August 25. The deadline for hotel reservations has passed, but members may still be able to find a room at a higher rate outside of the BLET room block.

The expanded programming in New Orleans was well-received, with large attendance at each session. Expanded programming options in Chicago will be offered on August 26 and will include a health & welfare benefits seminar as well as a general membership discussion with members of the BLET Executive Committee.

Open and members-only closed meetings will take place on August 25. Traditional training workshops for Local Chairmen, Legislative Representatives, and Secretary-Treasurers, along with special sessions regarding retirement/insurance benefits, will be held on August 27.

More information about the Chicago regional meeting is available here.

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