



Main



Rail Conference Members Take on Capitol Hill

as the U.S. House prepared for a floor vote on the Rail Safety Bill of 2007 this fall, anti-union lobbyists from Norfolk Southern (NS) were pounding the halls of Congress.

Their mission: try to convince members that camp cars were OK. The Teamsters Rail Conference, though, had plans of its own and brought in seven current NS members and some of the volunteer political coordinators from a variety of states.

“We came to D.C. to wake up our legislators about the horrible conditions that NS puts us in every day we are on the job,” said a Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employes Division (BMWED) member from Virginia. “I’ve traveled in camp cars for rail work for the past three years in Ohio, Virginia and even down to Jacksonville, Florida. These cars are cramped. There are eight men to each car.”

“I’ve been in camp cars ever since I started on the railroad years ago,” said a BMWED member based in Alabama. “My gang usually works two or three weeks at a time. The camp cars have been with us for the past six years. And in six years they have painted the camp cars one time. And on the inside they haven’t done anything. They will patch leaks, but no remodeling is ever done.”

NS recently had to close a dining car down because it was infested with roaches because they never spray. They usually prepare the food hours before the workers are actually done with their jobs so when they are ready to eat the food is cold.

Target

Elimination of Camp Cars

“The conditions are horrible,” a member said. “You go into the dining car and there are flies everywhere, even on the food. The food has been sitting in open canisters for hours with flies on it. The supervisors are supposed to taste the food to make sure it is edible, but they don’t eat it. Instead they go to a restaurant.”

Taking Aim at Camp Car Elimination

Earlier this year, the BMWED and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) worked to inform legislators in Indiana about camp cars. The result was a bill, approved by both the Indiana Senate and House, that gives permission to county health and safety boards to inspect camp cars. However, since the bill went into effect in May of this year, NS has stopped using camp cars in Indiana, choosing to house all of their BMWED employees in motel rooms.

Rail Conference President Ed Rodzowicz and Teamsters Vice President At-Large Freddie Simpson, who is also the President of the BMWED, contacted members of the U.S. House, telling them, “Although NS will try to tell you that camp cars are adequate, you also should know that the NS management employees who supervise the track and bridge workers are housed in single occupancy motel rooms, not camp cars. We think this practice speaks volumes on what NS management really thinks of camp cars.”

“Camp cars are very bad, substandard housing,” said a member who worked on CSX in Indiana. “In the past only the supervisors stayed in motel rooms, but now NS is just avoiding having the health inspections done in Indiana by moving all of their employees to motels. A couple of years ago a member called me to let me know about a particularly disgusting car. Apparently NS tried to drain the portable restrooms and their system backed up which caused the human feces to spray into

one of the camp cars. The supervisor on duty asked the men to wash down the inside of the car and to pour water into the heating vents. This didn’t wash everything away, however. When I inspected the car I could see hardened feces under the sinks and in the heating ducts. And it wasn’t until I complained way up the ladder of NS that they finally had a professional cleaning crew come out and clean the car.”

“I know that if we were housed in single-occupancy motel rooms our attitude would be better,” said a member of the BMWED and employee of NS. “There is no privacy in the camp cars. It is no way for anyone to live.”

House Staff Enlightened on Camp Cars

About a dozen members of the BMWED spent a week a Washington, D.C. speaking with members of Congress about the need to retain language in House Resolution 2095 that eliminates camp cars. Many members on the Democrat side were already convinced that camp cars needed to be eliminated, and some Republican staffers, after initially rebuffing members’ accounts of living in the cars, soon began to see the light.

“You could see their eyes bug out when we told them about the conditions we endure in the camp cars,” said a member of the BMWED. “When I started on the rails I was young and I didn’t know any better. But it didn’t take long for me to get very tired of camp cars. They were always losing their power, air, heat or water. And it is not a clean place. Everyone in the kitchen preparing the food has to wash up with non-potable water. This is the type of water that has labels above each sink that say, ‘Do Not Drink, Non-Potable Water’, but the kitchen workers washed the pots and pans with it, we used it to shower and brush our teeth with and it was used to make the ice for our Kool-Aid and tea.”

“I think the people in Congress were shocked when we told them about the camp cars,” a member said. “We



needed to be here in Washington, D.C. to educate people and show them the conditions we live in. I believe our visits made a difference.”

Location, Location, Location

In addition to the deplorable condition of the camp cars themselves, members explained to House staff that the location of the camp cars poses a unique threat to the rest time for the men and their own safety. Due to the size of many of the rail gangs, it is only practical for the camps to be located in a rail yard or along a main line.

“You can fix mold and the mice and the flies and the water, but these camp cars are still going to be parked on a rail in a yard or on a siding,” said Sam Alexander, Vice Chairman of the Southern System Division of the BMWED. “And each time a train comes up to the camp they need to sound their horn, and this is often in the middle of the night. Plus, many trains are hauling hazardous waste. What if a derailment occurred? It would wipe out the whole camp with our men sleeping in the camp cars.”

“With the beds being too short, the sound of the train horns or trains switching in the yards, you don’t get the proper sleep,” a member said. “NS has the mentality that they want to be able to put their hands on their employees, keep them close by. But you don’t treat someone like this.”

Pushing for Passage of an Intact Rail Safety Bill

In support of brothers and sisters of the Maintenance of

Way Employes Division, Teamsters General President Jim Hoffa sent a letter to each member of the U.S. House of Representatives expressing strong opposition to any attempt to strip language from H.R. 2095, the Rail Safety Bill of 2007, which does away with camp cars.

“Rail workers employed by Norfolk Southern are the last group that must endure the use of these camp cars, which are outdated, cramped, lacking potable water and inside toilet facilities,” Hoffa said. “Workers housed in these cars after a long, hard day on the job must bathe, cook, wash dishes and make ice with non-potable water. Workers must also use outside toilet facilities--at times trudging through the rain and snow with a flashlight to find a portable toilet in the middle of the night.

“If that wasn’t enough of an inconvenience, imagine trying to sleep next to a railroad track and being disturbed by the noise and vibration of passing trains, with some sounding their whistles as they go by,” Hoffa said. “The Rail Safety Bill goes a long way in providing a safer work environment in a dangerous industry when workers are on the job.”

The Rail Conference and the legislative departments of the Teamsters, the BMWED and BLET will continue to work to keep the pressure on Congress so that the elimination of camp cars is secured.

**The members’ names in this article were changed for fear of retaliation from the company.*

