

Unions tell NMB: Reject railroads' plan to silence workers

WASHINGTON, D.C., January 11 -- A railroad industry proposal, which enjoys the support of key Bush appointees, was condemned today by transportation labor unions who said it would suppress rail workers from speaking out on issues of working conditions, safety, and pay.

According to Edward Wytkind, president of the AFL-CIO's Transportation Trades Department (TTD), the regulatory changes would, "use a thin disguise of new 'filing fees' to stifle complaints about unsafe and unfair conduct by the railroads."

BLET National President Don Hahs and Vice-President Richard K. Radek were among the many BLET representatives at the hearing as well as the early morning rally that preceded it. Vice-President Radek testified on behalf of BLET and articulated how the proposed "filing fees" would do more to harm the current system than to help it.

The proposal seeks to impose fees on rail employees who seek arbitration services from the National Mediation Board (NMB). It is believed that imposition of these fees will discourage rail employees from filing grievances.

Bush appointees to the National Mediation Board, which oversees labor-management relations in the rail and air industries, are not only "doing the bidding of the giant railroads," Wytkind said, but would also be acting in a "dangerous and illogical" manner if it made it harder for front-line workers to speak up in a time of mounting safety and security challenges for the railroads.

Wytkind said the proposal would, "blow a hole in the collective bargaining system" governed by the Railway Labor Act. For over 70 years the federal government has mandated arbitration between labor and management over these disputes with the aim of reducing disruptions in rail service.

Outside of a hearing on the issue held earlier today by the National Mediation Board, 250 rail workers marched in protest of the plan. Testifying at the hearing, George Francisco, president of the National Conference of Firemen and Oilers, and chair of the TTD's Rail Labor Division, termed the proposal a, "hostile federal tax on our members' right to speak out," which would give the railroads "an upper hand over their employees and an even greater incentive to ignore collective bargaining."

President Hahs noted that several locomotive engineers from across the United States attended the rally and thanked them for taking time from their busy schedules to participate on such short notice.