

The Issue of Crew Fatigue

For many railroaders, especially those in the operating crafts, fatigue is a very real – and a very dangerous – phenomenon. Unfortunately, the rail carriers see fit to work you constantly, literally to death! On a positive note, the Federal government has just passed landmark legislation that makes broader provision for railroad workers to achieve adequate rest. However, even with the new provisions (longer rest hours, mandatory off days, etc.), there will be times when you are overcome with fatigue and feel it is unsafe to work.

If and when this happens to you, be aware of how you should handle the situation. Understand that the carrier may not be pleased with your refusal to take a call, or choosing to mark off in advance “fatigued”. If you are called and feel unsafe to crew a train, tell the caller that you are unsafe to operate the train because of fatigue. Remember the call is recorded so anything you say can be used against you. Ask for the caller’s name and state emphatically that you do not feel safe to take the call. More than likely, the caller will insist, at which point you have the option to either:

- Take the call under protest, noting the time and the name of the crew caller.
- Demand to speak to the supervisor, and if s/he takes the same position as the caller, take the call and note the time and name of the supervisor.
- Refuse the call with the understanding that you have missed the call and that the carrier may seek to discipline you for your refusal.

It is best to avoid this situation if at all possible. Check your line ups regularly, get your rest, and if necessary, mark off in advance to avoid a confrontation that may result in you either:

- A) Accepting a job that you are not properly rested for; or
- B) Refusing a call and possibly subjecting yourself to discipline.

Ultimately, the best way for all of us to avoid crew fatigue is to collectively demand that the carrier hire enough staff to adequately crew trains and keep a full complement of engineers and trainmen on the boards. In addition, we need to refuse to do the carriers bidding – think before you work your off days, before you double back, before you take extra work. The throat you cut may be your own! Every time we do favors and allow the company to conduct its business with fewer employees, it only gives the carrier incentive to keep the payroll to a minimum and the boards trimmed. Every time you do the company a favor, the company will expect it of your co-workers, some of whom may not be ready willing nor able to work such demanding hours. And while you yourself may want the extra money now, there is sure to come a time when – for various reasons – you do not wish to work so many tours-of-duty, so many hours.

Think of your safety and health and the safety and health of your co-workers. Think of your personal life and your relationships, not just now but for the years to come. It is up to all of us to work together to ensure adequate and necessary staffing to safely crew our trains. We cannot rely on the carriers to do this because they will always opt for the fewest number of employees possible. Demand the time off work to enjoy your life and to enjoy your family, to enjoy your friends and your hobbies and interests. And most importantly, demand the time off necessary to ensure that you are rested and ready to work safe!