



Railroad Workers United

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The Rank & File in Action!

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RWU Resolution Against Autonomous “Pod Trains”

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Whereas, the introduction of so called autonomous ‘pod trains’ is being sold as some kind of “solution” to the nation’s freight shipping needs, but would only eliminate operating employees, reduce rail’s inherent efficiencies, and result in a dangerous operating environment for trackside communities and motorists; and

Whereas, Individual shipping containers on pod train ‘sleds’ could not practically make use of pantograph and catenary, therefore relying solely on battery power for each ‘sled’; and

Whereas, a system limited to transporting standard shipping containers in this fashion leaves a substantial percentage of rail capacity unused, including shipment weight (~250K lbs in a boxcar vs. ~50K lbs in a shipping container designed to be hauled by a tractor trailer), and the inability to double stack such containers; and

Whereas, the Rail Industry landscape is a brutal outdoor environment that employs relatively inexpensive railcars that are exposed to weather, poor track, and other dilapidated equipment, expected to last fifty years with minimal maintenance; and

Whereas, the pod train system brings a major new expense and mechanical complexity, which includes optical sensors, batteries, and associated electronics, to each of the proposed hundreds of thousands of units on build-out; and

Whereas, pod trains and all their associated systems and components would have to be certified by the American Association of Railroads, which will take their focus away from certifying other much lower hanging fruit, such as new catenary materials; and

Whereas, rail industry technology tends to be or become homogeneous for operating safety, simplicity and sheer cost differential, pod trains at scale would essentially containerize all rail freight, ruining the economics of bulk shipping by rail and wasting capacity in general; and

Whereas, pod trains on build-out would require the full automation (or abandonment) of all track switches in the entire rail network; and

Whereas, while reducing the time of a given crossing closure, the pod train system could dramatically increase the number of closures, leading to additional motorists ignoring crossing signals at their peril, and a resultant increase in grade crossing accidents; and

Whereas, crossing safety is dependent on video-based sensors feeding an algorithm, with no human to catch unseen hazards and override false positives, nor to assist in the event of grade crossing accident; and

Whereas, the lack of mechanical couplers on each unit would complicate clearing a non-operating unit (including one that suffers a dead battery) from the tracks, and

Whereas, the fact that rail management entertains this and other deeply impractical schemes from outside the rail industry while ignoring the huge resource of their employees' collective wisdom exemplifies the undervaluing of operating employees; and

Whereas, at-scale adoption of pod trains would by definition eliminate all operating (non-maintenance) employees - a major chunk of the 140,570 workers employed in the U.S. freight rail industry, and create an extremely motivated force - many of whom are experienced campaigners - in opposition to ubiquitous autonomy, and

Whereas, pod train sleds would need charging points for each sled as opposed to just a handful for a battery-supplemented locomotive; and

Whereas, Parallel Systems states that its pod's range is up to 500 miles while the conventional length of haul accepted to be competitive with trucking is 700 miles, and

Whereas, at-scale adoption of pod trains will make obsolete a major part of the existing ~1.5MM North American railcar fleet, with 40K to 60K of new conventional railcars being built every year and beginning what should be a 50 year depreciation, and

Whereas, unattended pod train operation means there is no person on-site to respond to a life-threatening emergency involving the train, and

Whereas, the pod train cars do not appear to include the headlights, ditch lights, horn, and bell required of locomotives and as individual cars have the ability to activate crossing signals and barriers,

Therefore, be it resolved that RWU condemns the ill-conceived concept of autonomous train pods, and urges the rail industry and rail unions to reject this farcical idea; and

Be it further resolved that RWU urge the rail industry and rail unions to support common sense globally tested, tried-and-true rail solutions such as overhead electrification and double tracking of mainlines; and

Be it finally resolved that RWU urges all rail advocacy groups, environmental organizations, community associations, shippers, and others to likewise condemn the gimmickry of these train pods and support real railroad infrastructure development.

Adopted by the Railroad Workers United Steering Committee 4/3/2024