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Family Farm Defenders (FFD) Supports Railroad Workers United (RWU)

We All Deserve Public Ownership of the Railroads!

Railroads should be treated as a public good – just like other essential national infrastructure (water, sewage, ports, highways, airports, electricity, internet).

Our railroad network was originally created by the federal government with massive taxpayer support to provide accessible and affordable transport of goods and people, but has since been largely expropriated by corporate interests to the detriment of the majority. Between the 1850s and the 1870s, the railroads were granted 175 million acres of land (expropriated from native peoples by the federal government) that was then used to subsidize their expansion and to hire (and exploit) many immigrant workers (Irish, Chinese, etc.)

In the late 19th century, workers, farmers, and consumers led grassroots resistance to the “robber barons” (including railroad tycoons such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, J.P. Morgan, Russell Sage, James Hill, Edward Harriman, among others) launching the Populist Movement, which helped propel many of the laws in the early 20th century that curtailed the power of monopolies. In 1918 over 90% of the 300,000 railroad workers then employed supported nationalization, but that did not come to pass when it later failed in Congress.

Today we are in a similar historic moment with just a small handful of corporate entities, enjoying an oligopoly over U.S. railroad service. Their profits doubled in the last 15 years, while they shed 45,000 workers in just the last 6 years. Our popular rail passenger service, Amtrak, remains under the thumb of this private cartel, which seriously inhibits its viability and reliability. They continue to violate the “common carrier” principle by discriminating against less lucrative rail consumers in order to maximize their own corporate profits. With fewer transit options, many marginalized rural/farm communities now rely even more heavily on Amtrak as their only connection to the rest of the country.

Nationalization of the railways would enable people and goods to share the public rails more equitably and efficiently. Food and people should not be getting thrown off the tracks to make way for stripmine coal or tarsands oil, which is what is happening now. The common good should take precedence over private profit, if we are to have a better climate friendly rapid rail transit system that serves everyone.

Family farmers, organized workers, and consumer passengers are among the vast majority of the U.S. public which would benefit from railroad nationalization. Family Farm Defenders stands in solidarity with Railroad Workers United and others in this call for public ownership of the railroads.

John E. Peck  
Executive Director