

Testimony of

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Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials**

“Amtrak’s Response to COVID-19”

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Chairman Lipinski, Ranking Member Crawford, and members of the committee, on behalf of the members of the Transport Workers Union of America, AFL-CIO, I wanted to thank you for holding this important hearing to discuss the damaging impacts COVID-19 has had on Amtrak frontline workers, and Amtrak’s response.

The Transport Workers Union represents over 151,000 members across the rail, aviation, transit, universities, utilities and services sectors. TWU members, like other critical frontline workers across the country, have suffered from the threats this virus has posed to our daily lives. More than 95% of TWU members are frontline transportation workers who have been deemed “essential workers” during this pandemic.

Nearly 10% of TWU members have tested positive or been quarantined from the virus. However, these numbers don’t account for the additional emotional and mental toll the virus has taken on my union colleagues as they live in fear of potentially bringing this virus home to their families, losing co-workers and friends, and potentially serving as a vector for the virus to members of our family, community, or workplace. Despite these threats, TWU members have continued to provide essential services across the country. At airports, train stations, bus depots, and as custodians, fighting in the frontline so our first responders are able to make it to work in hospitals, clinics, police and fire stations.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to share both my own experience and the experiences of Amtrak workers during the COVID-19 crisis. This is an issue with which our union is, unfortunately, all too familiar. My colleagues and I at Amtrak have witnessed firsthand the disastrous effects this pandemic has caused on our personal lives and to the economy.

Amtrak's 20,000 employees include the TWU members who work onboard providing food and beverage service to passengers, as well as carmen and cleaners who work to maintain, repair, and service Amtrak cars in the rail yards. As a Lead Service Attendant for Amtrak's On-Board Service for 32 years, President of Transport Workers Union Local 1460, and most importantly as an American, it is my duty to serve even under these dire circumstances.

Under Amtrak's on-board service, TWU members who provide much of Amtrak's food and beverage services have kept working their routes, allowing safe, comfortable train travel to continue, even if on a more limited basis. These workers also have had to fight for adequate protections in the face of a pandemic. At the beginning of the crisis, when Amtrak claimed it could not find masks or sanitizer for our members, the union secured proper PPE and distributed it to the frontline workforce. We have actively engaged and fought with the railroad to ensure that enhanced cleaning and infection prevention protocols such as temperature checks mandatory mask policies for passengers are in place on all routes. While access to PPE supplies is not an issue anymore, Amtrak's COVID-19 policy is potentially putting employees at risk.

This past July, while working my regular position as Lead Service Attendant on the Amtrak Acela, en route to Boston from Washington, DC, I was notified by my supervisor, Jamal Philips, that on July 24 I had been in contact and exposed to an employee who had tested positive for COVID-19 and that Amtrak's medical department would be in contact with me.

Fearing of possibly infecting passengers and coworkers on my train, I contacted our TWU Railroad Division Director John Feltz to make him aware of what was happening. Mr. Feltz contacted On Board Service General Superintendent Anella Popo, and strongly suggested that I should be removed from my position at the New York Penn Station and be replaced by another employee. Ms. Popo contacted the medical department and they advised her that they would be in contact with my direct supervisor Jamal Philips. Supervisor Philips then contacted

me and stated that the medical department said that I could continue to Boston if I were not showing symptoms, and that they would remove me from service the next day.

On the next day, I was not removed from service. I again contacted Mr. Feltz and in a 3-way conversation with Ms. Popo, Mr. Feltz, and myself, she responded that it must have been a mistake and she would have the situation corrected, which to her credit she did. I was removed from service and told to quarantine for 14 days. After 10 days of quarantine, however, I was contacted by Amtrak's medical department and told that since I was "not showing" symptoms of COVID-19 I could return to service the next day.

I was never tested for COVID-19 before I returned to work. And just do you know, there is also a lack of coach cleaners as many of them have been out on sick leave from the coronavirus, and Amtrak does not fill these vacancies. This has made it hard for Amtrak's coach cleaners to sanitize the cars properly.

Keeping coach cars, maintenance facilities, and employee break rooms sanitized is time-consuming and labor-intensive. It is work that is done by people committed to making sure Amtrak is safe – not just for our coworkers, but more importantly for the traveling public.

This is why it is extremely disheartening to learn that Amtrak plans to furlough 20% of its workforce, including 700 on-board services workers represented by TWU, beginning in October. I'll be honest, this is like a slap in the face. These are my brothers and sisters who have put their lives on the line during this pandemic. We have continued to go to work when our government has asked everyone else to stay home. The increased exposure and risk we have faced because of this is not on our job description. In return for the brave effort my colleagues have made over the past six months, the railroad is threatening the livelihoods of 2,000 essential workers. This is not acceptable.

But it's not just TWU workers that are being affected by the proposed cuts. Per Amtrak management, as many as 10,000 workers at the railroad could be impacted by workforce reductions. These are devastating numbers that require immediate aid from Congress.

It also requires Amtrak to re-think some of the decisions that will be made in the coming months as we face these drastic cuts. For example, management has committed to reinstating

the 401(k) match for managers in beginning in October, just as the first set of frontline workers will be sent onto unemployment.

Likewise, in November, all of management's pay cuts expire and their full pay will be reinstated, while onboard service people who had their hours reduced from 180 per month to 150 will remain that way for the foreseeable future. We urge Amtrak to prioritize the rank & file, frontline workers who interact directly with our riders, the people who are facing job loss, rather than themselves.

Amtrak is an essential service in this country – it ensures that communities across the country have access to all of our economy. But the railroad is powered by frontline workers, like me, who service customers, clean cars, fix engines, and drive locomotives.

We are urging Congress to provide at least \$4.5 billion in support for the railroad not just to help keep our jobs but preserve this industry and sustain the communities we serve.

That is not possible without the frontline workers who *are* the railroad. It is our hope that we can all work together to ensure the survival of Amtrak, and more importantly, protect these workers who have already sacrificed so much, and continue to do so every day.

Thank you for allowing me to speak today and I look forward to any questions you may have.