

Railroad workforce levels sink to new low

(The following story by John D. Boyd appeared on the Journal of Commerce website on December 29, 2009.)

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The U.S. lines of the seven Class I freight railroads cut 1,923 jobs in the month to mid-November, leaving their combined workforce at a new low of 147,097.

Reports the carriers submitted to the Surface Transportation Board show most of the cuts coming in track maintenance crews. That job category accounted for 33,561 employees at mid-November, down from 34,622 at the same point in October.

The largest rail jobs category – train and engine workers – also shrank in the run-up to the Thanksgiving holiday period. Class I carriers trimmed their T&E force to 56,447 from 57,198 a month earlier.

In all, the November STB report shows the fourth straight monthly decline since a brief gain in rail jobs in July, when new and tighter work-hour rules took hold.

The latest total is down from 149,020 workers the Class Is reported for October, 159,511 in January and 163,020 in November 2008.

The STB requires the largest group of railroads to report their workforce as of the first payroll of each month. The companies then have until month's end to mail in those figures, and the agency assembles them into a single report.

The agency also ranks each month's total against the average for a base year of 1967, when the report began. Back then, Class I rail employment averaged around 600,000. The latest level is just 24.1 percent of the 1967 average, and down from 26.2 percent at the start of 2009 after the big railroads cut jobs almost steadily through the year.

For November, BNSF Railway with the second-largest rail workforce made the largest job cuts. Others trimming their payrolls were Union Pacific Railroad, the largest employer, plus CSX Transportation and the U.S. units of Canadian Pacific Railway and Canadian National Railway.

Two carriers added workers from mid-October. They were Norfolk Southern Railway and Kansas City Southern.