

United Transportation Union demands historic concessions from train conductors

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A United Transportation Union local has proposed a contract with BNSF railway that, if enacted, will serve as a model for workforce reduction across the entire rail industry in North America. Once new signaling technology is implemented in 2015, the contract would allow the railroad to replace an on-board conductor on many trains with a roaming, on-the-ground conductor. This would leave many trains with only one crew member: the engineer.

The proposal would potentially lead to job losses as the new “master conductor” position is assigned a greater share of work across an area. The contract would expand the range of tasks and assignments of a conductor, while offering a pittance of compensation in return. It also may risk the potential safety of crewmembers and the public by enacting widely-criticized one-man operations on a large scale for the first time.

The contract is being promoted by the UTU SMART local GO-001, which represents 3,000 conductors, brakeman, yardmen, and enginemen on portions of the BNSF railroad across the midwest and western United States. Throughout the contract the union uses the term “transformational” to describe their agreement to fundamentally undermine the jobs and protections of conductors it claims to represent.

The proposed contract is based on the implementation of Positive Train Control (PTC), which was mandated by Congress and the Federal Railroad Administration to be in place by 2015. It will provide constant enforcement of speed restrictions and protection from collisions. Through GPS and other electronic equipment, a train with PTC would receive continually updated information about its authority for movement at a given speed in a given area, and equipment in the locomotive would enforce these restrictions.

The proposed BNSF contract makes clear that the private freight railroads intend to use the cost and added safety of PTC implementation as an excuse for implementing one-person operations.

When PTC is in place, BNSF and UTU claim that it will be safe to have just the engineer operating the train, assuming some of the responsibilities of a conductor. This comes as railroads push year after year for longer and heavier trains, which in turn require more experience and skill on the part of engineers. As it is, some BNSF trains are over 2 miles long, and others are more than 20,000 tons. These massive trains run through both major urban centers and remote regions with challenging geography.

Railroads have progressively reduced the size of train crews to cut costs, going from five people in the 1970s, to three people in the 1980s and two people in the 1990s. Ever since then, the railroads have pushed for one-man crews. Since 1970, railroad employment has fallen from 617,000 to 238,000 at present. Of those, 38,350 employees are conductors or yardmasters.

If the UTU contract passes at BNSF, it will serve as a model for every freight railroad in North America to restructure operations and cut their workforce.

On July 16, Carla Groleau of CSX, a major railroad, told WKYC that it “currently operates all mainline revenue trains on two-person crews, but future technology such as PTC should be tested to assess best practices over time.” Undoubtedly the freight railroads will claim that one-person crews are safe.

These comments are made even as public concern over rail safety rises in the wake of several major railroad derailments. In several locations around the country, trains carrying crude oil have derailed and the oil has burst into flames, endangering both crew and communities.

A BNSF oil train that derailed near Cassleton, North Dakota on December 30, 2013, causing a massive explosion and the release of 400,000 gallons of crude, was only just outside a more populated area where the damage could have been far worse.

On July 6, 2013, an oil train operated by Montreal, Maine, & Atlantic Railway ran away near Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, then derailed in the town. The damaged cars of oil burst into flame, leveling the center of the town and killing 47 residents. The train was operated by a one-person crew consisting of just an engineer, a cost-cutting practice pioneered by the owner of the railroad, Ed Burkhardt.

In response to these accidents, the Federal Railroad Administration has proposed the issuance of a rule requiring the use of two-person crews on oil and other trains. But the proposed rule “is expected to include appropriate exceptions” and will be the subject of enormous opposition from the multi-billion dollar freight rail industry.

At the moment, that industry is experiencing an upturn in traffic, making the UTU’s proposal all the more remarkable. BNSF is wholly owned by Warren Buffett’s Berkshire Hathaway, and it is the railroad with the greatest access to the booming Bakken Crude region. Oil traffic has expanded so rapidly that it overwhelmed the railroad’s capacity and staffing this winter. Yet instead of a struggle for better working conditions, the UTU offers radical labor cuts to a corporation gushing with profits.

The proposed contract has already been met with enormous opposition from railroad workers, both conductors and engineers, who are represented by another union, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen. Engineers have expressed that they don’t want to be alone in the cab, stressing how two people are better equipped to identify and address problems that threaten safety and operation. Despite this, for years the UTU and BLET have pitted the trades against each other.

Certain provisions of the contract make it clear that the UTU is offering itself as a cooperative partner with BNSF in return for a privileged position over the other railroad unions. The contract would allow the UTU “master conductor” to run yard engines, haul other crews around, and communicate with trains operating through maintenance zones. All of these tasks are

currently performed by other craft unions.

In effect, the strategy of the UTU is to accept the dictate of the railroads—one-person operations—and then negotiate the best conditions for maintaining its dues base as the job cuts come, behind the backs of its own members, and against the interests of other railroad workers. To do so, its proposed contract undermines the working conditions and safety of the very conductors it claims to represent.



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