

CSX worker in Tennessee seriously injured due to cutbacks

Railroads push cost-cutting and contract concessions

Jeff Lusanne
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The WSWS urges railroad workers to contact us with information and to receive updates.

Three years into an expired contract with 145,000 railroad workers, the coalition of major railroad carriers continues to push for sharp cuts in contract negotiations. The railroads are demanding major increases in health care costs, changes to work rules, and little to no wage increases over a five-year contract covering 2015-2020. Even as the negotiations drag out, the railroads have implemented changes to squeeze out more from workers.

The National Carrier Contract Committee (NCCC) represents most of the major railroads in the United States. Of those, Union Pacific (UP) and BNSF cover the western half of the United States, Norfolk Southern (NS) and CSX the eastern half. Canadian National (CN) and Kansas City Southern have a smaller footprint in the Midwest and South. Smaller railroads are included in the NCCC as well.

The NCCC has been negotiating with 13 unions in three coalitions, over a contract that expired January 1, 2015, covering a wide variety of crafts. In each proposal, there are zero or minimal wage increases from 2015-2017, and 2 percent wage increases for future years. The cost of monthly health care would rise, as would the cost of medical procedures, and health care costs would also rise yearly. There are vast changes to work rules that demand more work, combined with loose restrictions on using union labor for work, opening up more jobs to subcontracting.

The proposals only deepen the long-term trends at railroads, which have been engaged in a decades-long campaign to slash labor costs, using technology, oppressive management, changing work rules, and anti-

labor government laws. The unions have worked to suppress opposition from workers, as they have done in auto, steel and other industries.

Discipline runs rampant on the railroads, where union train operating crews (TY&E) report a layer of management whose primary purpose seems to be harassing crews and getting them fired over petty rule infractions. Appeals by the unions take months or years to resolve. While managers used to rise from TY&E jobs, for decades they mostly have been hired off the street with no prior experience, expanding the gulf between management and TY&E crews.

In the industry, the leading force behind the demand for cuts has been the hedge fund-backed CSX management of Hunter Harrison, who increasingly sets the standard for what other companies will implement. Harrison first caught the eye of Wall Street as CEO of CN, when he implemented vast cutbacks across its transcontinental Canadian and Midwestern United States network. In 2012, Pershing Square Capital installed him as CEO of Canadian Pacific, and in 2017, Mantle Ridge Capital successfully campaigned for his appointment as CEO of CSX.

Since March, Harrison has closed and downgraded dozens of major facilities and created an even more hostile management structure that pushes speedups and unsafe work practices. He has been known to cut maintenance employees and shop employees, and contract out jobs. TY&E workers report that managers are under extreme pressure to document a rule infraction by a TY&E employee, or the managers themselves will risk losing their jobs. Harrison has used such techniques at CN and Canadian Pacific to intimidate employees and accelerate the pace of layoffs.

Harrison's tenure at CSX has already led to employee injuries from derailments that stem from new policies. On August 21st, a trainman at Radnor Yard in Nashville, Tennessee was seriously injured when a train moving next to him struck him. Minutes went by as his fellow crewmembers radioed management controlling the yard and only received silence, as they were absent from their positions, watching the eclipse. The trainman suffered injuries requiring amputation.

Radnor Yard was a hump yard, where cars are mechanically sorted and move by gravity. Harrison shut down the humping process, making crews flat switch the yard. Yet crews have pointed out that the yard was not designed for that process—its tracks for sorting freight cars are not level, but inclined—and no upgrades were made to accommodate it. Workers report a large number of derailments, and now a serious injury has occurred.

For TY&E employees, another significant change across all railroads would be the implementation of an hourly wage, instead of payment that depends on trips and job assignments. When Harrison was CEO of CN and Canadian Pacific, TY&E crews were switched to an hourly agreement. A former TY&E crewmember at CN agreed to share with the WSWS what they posted online about the change.

“Managers at Hunter companies manage by fear. Their favorite thing is pulling people out of service for delaying a train or pinning train delays on train crews because everything is ‘scheduled.’ Expect to have a constant target on your back and for anything to be taken as a reason for an investigation notice. That is how Hunter manages. Even though he was gone, the managers there were trained by him and fear management was the culture he generated at CN. NS and CN management are very similar.

“Lifestyle was ok, but expect to work 10-12 hours every single day minimum. On most railroads doublestack trains are the best trains you can get. On CN, they are the worst. If you get in 6 or 7 hours old, they will put you to work switching the yard until you die. You can work 15 trains in a day and still get paid the same basic day, no dog catch claims or anything like that. There is no such thing as a quit. Management tells you that you are slaves for 12 hours every day and they treat you as such. It's all about production, car velocity, how many cars we can switch in a shift, block

swapping, and utilizing train crews until they are so physically and mentally exhausted that they can barely function.

“Expect more loco and car shop closures. Contracting of repair work, and reduction of workforce in all departments. That is how Hunter works. ‘Do more with less.’ The most common phrase spoken by a front line manager at CN in reference to a bad order locomotive is ‘we are not a repair facility, I order you to take it as is.’ Toilet overflowing onto the floor and nobody will dump it because Hunter fired all of the mechanical people at your terminal when he was there so that it can't be considered a repair facility anymore.”

What Harrison did at CN is now being implemented at CSX, and UP, BNSF, and NS are taking notice. CSX has laid off 2,300 employees this year, and Harrison suggests 1,000 more will be fired or let go. In August, UP announced the layoff of 500 managers and 250 union employees, primarily at its headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska. Norfolk Southern cut \$250 million last year, and expects another \$100 million in cuts this year. It has consolidated dispatcher territories, combined yardmaster jobs, and downgraded yards and facilities. CN had 25,530 employees in 2014, but by the end of 2016 was down to 22,249 employees, even as it carries greater volumes of traffic.



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