CSX continues cuts, botches relocation of train dispatchers

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CSX, one of the largest four railroads in America, has undergone a series of disastrous changes since a hedge-fund backed asset stripper, Hunter Harrison, was installed as CEO in March. Recently, it has emerged that a miscommunication about the relocation of hundreds of train dispatchers to Florida has left several dispatchers sleeping in their cars, without housing.

In June, a CSX memo announced that train dispatchers, who control rail traffic, would be consolidated in the company's Jacksonville, Florida headquarters between August and October. Later, CSX updated the relocation timeline to January, with officials claiming they did not know where the June notice came from, although they admitted it was posted in Atlanta, Georgia dispatching offices.

The miscommunication and change of plans is typical of the past eight months, where workers and even managers have constantly faced wildly changing operational plans and job assignments, combined with thousands of layoffs and wide-scale closures of facilities. Morale has plummeted to the lowest depths, and poor service to customers has prompted a Congressional hearing.

In the case of dispatchers, the changing plans left the lives of some upended. They spent thousands of dollars on selling their homes, breaking their leases, paying for storage, travel for themselves and families, and a range of other moving-related expenses. Spouses sometimes had to give up work, and children had their schooling and extracurricular activities interrupted. Dispatchers were not provided time off for the moves, and had to take vacation and sick days to do it.

Then, with their lives partially moved to Florida, they discovered that their jobs were still in regional dispatching centers in Chicago, Indianapolis, Albany, Louisville, and Atlanta. Yet they were, and are, without housing in their original location, and generally cannot afford to pay for both housing there and in Florida.

In some cases, dispatchers have resorted to sleeping in cars, as reported by the *Jacksonville Business Journal*. In Atlanta, eight dispatchers are doing so, with CSX providing a locker on site for their belongings while warning them “against staying on CSX property after hours.” CSX provided hotel housing from just October 15 through November 1, and to add insult to injury, forced dispatchers to foot the cost of hotel bill taxes, which were hundreds of dollars.

The treatment of dispatchers is reckless and dangerous, and will put the lives of other railroad workers, as well as the general public, at risk. Dispatchers have enormous responsibilities. They are assigned to cover the movement of traffic on hundreds of miles of track. Busy routes have constant activity that the dispatchers must plan and manage, and in some parts of the system, freight trains are intermixed with heavy passenger train traffic.

Decades of cuts and consolidations have been imposed on dispatchers at all railroads.

Originally traffic was controlled by lineside tower operators, spread out across routes, who were intimately familiar with their territory and the crews who worked it. With massive reductions, those jobs moved to regional dispatching centers, and on some railroads, a single dispatching center. In the process, dispatchers are offered little time for first-hand travel and examination of the very routes they control.

Additionally, dispatching jobs have been consolidated. During their shift, many dispatchers are responsible for several different routes simultaneously, including monitoring all the computer screens, phone calls, and radio communications that each would involve. Added to this mix are the constantly changing

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operating plans of management, which only add a layer of complexity to the job.

In the late 1800s, dispatchers, then a management position, worked 12-hour days, seven days a week. A 1907 law made it eight hours a day, seven days a week. The American Train Dispatchers Association (ATDA) was founded in Spokane, Washington, on November 1, 1917, with the demand for “one day off in seven”—as emblazoned on its logo.

In the recent decades, through the use of computers, railroads have sought to “deprofessionalize” dispatchers and cut training, as the workload has gone up and up. No doubt, they would like to return to working dispatchers seven days a week, or 12 hours a day, and in some cases, they have—including at Burlington Northern in the 1980s where Hunter Harrison was rising through the ranks. After Harrison took over CSX, low-level managers have been forced to work seven days a week, and operating crews notoriously, on all railroads, can hardly even take holidays off.

Operating crews are now struggling to hold jobs at several terminals across the system. Willard, Ohio, had one of the largest yards to sort traffic in the system, and it is now nearly shut down, with dozens of workers furloughed. Yards in North Baltimore, Ohio, and Hamlet, North Carolina have also been severely cut back. Workers report that to hold assignment in these and other regions, you now need 12 to 14 years of seniority, as the cuts have been so deep.

Nationally, railroad workers are in the process of voting on a contract agreement covering 2015-2019. Most of the largest railroad unions, as well as the ATDA, are pushing the agreement, which includes increases in health care costs. Railroad workers, facing decades of cuts, widely oppose it such a deal.

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