

Canada: Train derailment kills three, exposes terrible working conditions

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Three workers were killed in the early morning of Monday, February 4, when the Canadian Pacific Rail train that they were working on derailed in the Rocky Mountains near the Alberta-British Columbia border. Conductor Dylan Paradis, locomotive engineer Andrew Dockrell, and conductor trainee Daniel Waldenberger-Bulmer perished in the accident.

A preliminary investigation undertaken by the Transportation Safety Board determined that the train, which was hauling grain, had been parked temporarily on a steep grade with air brakes applied at Partridge station for about two hours to facilitate a shift change. Suddenly, around 1 AM, “the train began to move on its own,” accelerating down a steep mountain grade, before 99 hopper cars and two locomotives derailed. Handbrakes had not been applied, a practice in accordance with existing Transport Canada guidance.

In response to the tragedy, Transportation Minister Marc Garneau felt compelled to temporarily order the application of handbrakes on all trains stopped on mountain slopes as a precaution, until the cause of the derailment is determined. Even this token measure proved too much for the rail bosses, with CP Rail reportedly energetically lobbying Transport Canada to abandon the new rule as too time-consuming, i.e., costly.

“As I have said many times before, rail safety is my top priority,” claimed Garneau. This is an entirely deceptive statement, given that the Transportation Safety Board’s own studies document the hazardous conditions routinely faced by transportation crews. Worker fatigue due to long and irregular hours, faulty machinery, the movement of dangerous cargo, extreme weather conditions, faulty safety mechanisms, and poor regulatory oversight are frequently cited as serious safety issues. However, for decades Liberal and Conservative governments alike have enabled private industry to run amok, facilitating multi-billion-dollar profits for the rail companies through the

shredding of transportation regulations.

As early as 1986, an official inquiry into a fatal collision in Hinton, BC, where 23 people were killed, determined that the crew demonstrated a lack of alertness probably due to chronic fatigue, and described a “railroader culture” that prized loyalty and productivity at the expense of safety.

In 2012, a passenger train derailed at Burlington, Ontario, killing the three crew members and injuring 46 passengers. An investigation determined that safety protections, as well as the crashworthiness of the cars, were inadequate.

Then in 2013, less than a year and a half later, 47 people were killed in Canada’s worst train disaster at Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, when a train carrying oil, and also parked on a sharp incline, suddenly started to move, careened into the center of town and exploded. The official investigation determined that fatigue had compromised the judgment of the lone crew member. Mechanical problems with the locomotives may also have played a role.

There are on average at least 50 derailments per month across the country. On the short section of track stretching from Field to Revelstoke, British Columbia where the most recent tragedy occurred, there have been 72 derailments since 2004. During 2018, there were 57 railway-related deaths across the country.

The frequency and severity of accidents is attributable to a relentless campaign of privatization and deregulation in Canada’s rail sector. This campaign, greenlighted by government in the early 1980s, has emboldened Canada’s railway oligopoly to pursue unfettered profit at the expense of basic worker protections. The number of railway inspections has plummeted, from over 7,000 in 1984 to less than 2,000 in 2016. Meanwhile, rail accidents rose by 7 percent in 2018 from a year earlier, with 1,170 “reported accidents”, or more than three per day.

Despite regular tragedies and a mountain of evidence pointing out obvious dangers to rail worker safety, successive governments have refused to properly oversee the industry, let alone prosecute flagrant safety violations. A recent internal Transport Canada memo acknowledges that work rules are feckless, and that “fatigue is managed by a patchwork of approaches most of which are outside Transport Canada’s control.”

With the direct facilitation of government and connivance of the rail unions, CN Rail and CP have destroyed thousands of jobs over the past two decades. In 1998, CN culled half of its workforce “to become the most efficient railroad in North America.” Between 2001 and 2010, one fifth of jobs in Canada’s railway industry were eliminated. In 2013, CN Rail cut another 3,000 jobs, and CP Rail’s new CEO has promised to cut nearly one-quarter of its workforce. This past November there was another spate of layoffs at CN Rail, although the company has declined to disclose the exact figure.

Over the past decade, governments of all stripes have openly bolstered the rail industry’s assault on working conditions. In 2012, the federal Conservative government used anti-democratic strike-breaking legislation to criminalize a strike by CP Rail workers. The federal NDP responded to the law with the pathetic remark that there was not much it could do because the government had a majority in parliament.

In April 2018, Justin Trudeau’s Liberal government suspended railway workers’ right to strike under the Canadian Labour Code. After rail workers overwhelmingly repudiated a rotten concessions contract in a government-supervised vote, Trudeau intervened to declare that his government would not tolerate a lengthy shutdown of the rail system by a strike.

The trade unions have also facilitated the railway companies’ decimation of work standards. In 2012, Teamsters officials ordered their membership to comply with the back-to-work law, and in 2015, on the verge of a strike deadline, agreed to have all outstanding issues decided by a Conservative government-appointed arbitrator.

In response to Trudeau’s threat of government intervention last year, the Teamsters called off a strike by 3,000 CP Rail workers, and capitulated to the company’s demands.

Unifor, which represents 9,200 rail workers, also makes a production out of denouncing safety negligence and jobs cuts, while complying with the capitalists’ demands. In response to the monumental culling of jobs over the past

decade, Unifor Rail Director Brian Stevens made the equivocal and vague assertion that “I think we need to ask if CP [Rail] is putting shareholders ahead of safety here.”

As rail accidents continue unabated, the rapacious train companies are raking in massive profits. In Canada, lucrative rail freight operations generate approximately \$10 billion annually. CN Rail is the biggest railway network on the continent, and in the last quarter of 2018 its revenues rose nearly sixteen percent to \$3.81 billion.

The rail business in Canada is set to expand. On the subject of oil exports, Alberta NDP Premier Rachel Notley declared that “rather than produce less, we have to find ways to move more.” Her government has committed to leasing 4,400 rail cars to accommodate the projected doubling of crude-by-rail shipments over the next two years. In British Columbia, CN Rail, in league with the federal government and port authority, is increasing cargo capacity through Vancouver’s harbour.

Under increasingly perilous conditions, with rail traffic set to increase with ever-shrinking crews, further disasters leading to injury and death are inevitable, absent the political intervention of the working class.

In a social system where the basic safety needs of workers are routinely contemptuously ignored by employers and governments, and no opposition is forthcoming from the unions, the only progressive alternative is the independent political struggle waged by workers themselves. Rail workers across the country must establish rank-and-file committees independent of, and in opposition to, the pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses. These committees should demand immediate measures be taken to improve railroad safety, and appeal for a common struggle with other workers whose jobs and working conditions are just as ruthlessly being sacrificed to satiate the greed of big business.



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