

Two BNSF workers died this month due to COVID-19 and work accident

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18 April 2021

Two workers for the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) railroad have died so far this month, one due to COVID-19 and the other in an industrial accident. Their deaths are the product of continuous speedup and cost-cutting, with which the railroad industry has continued in spite of the pandemic.

Fifty-three-year-old locomotive engineer Bryan D. Stowe died from COVID-19 last Monday. He had 23 years seniority at BNSF and was member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLET) Division 98 in Lincoln, Nebraska. BNSF is the largest Class 1 railroad in North America and has 41,000 employees.

On April 9, 24-year BNSF veteran trainman/brakeman Buddy Lee Streike was killed when he was pinned between two cars as he was working in Louisiana, Missouri. He was 56 years old. He was also the Secretary Treasurer for the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) Local 219 in Hannibal, Missouri.

Buddy is survived by his wife, Lisa, of 34 years, and son Matthew. Buddy's family shared a remembrance of him: "Away from work, Buddy loved being outside and visiting the family farm, he had a green thumb and enjoyed working in his garden where he grew tomatoes, cucumbers, jalapeños, and banana peppers. A wonderful cook, Buddy made the most delicious cheesecakes, birthday cakes, and soups."

The railroad companies have been pushing for cost-cutting measures, including one-person crews and the lengthening of train lengths to up to three miles, in order to deal with port congestion on the Pacific Coast in response to record delays. The ultra-long freight trains present a danger to the public, as they have the potential to block road crossings for extended periods,

which could block emergency vehicles and cause traffic jams.

The congestion in west coast container ports is due to backups caused by the pandemic, combined with a massive rebound in US retail imports. "We've never seen imports at this high a level for such an extended period of time," Jonathan Gold of the National Retail Federation (NRF) told apparel industry website juststyle.com.

The American Association of Railroads, meanwhile, reported a 14.2 percent increase in year-over-year freight volume last month, including an increase of 22.1 percent in grain, 7.6 percent in coal, and 16.3 percent in vehicles and auto parts.

Railroad workers have been hit hard by the pandemic. In January, the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) revealed that there were at least 10 COVID-19-related deaths at Union Pacific (UP) last year. Threats of strike action by the union were blocked by a federal court last December, on the grounds that it is prohibited by the Railway Labor Act and the Federal Railroad Safety Act. The RLA in particular functions to outlaw strikes in the railroad and airline industries in all but the most exceptional cases by enforcing mandatory federal arbitration and prohibiting contracts from expiring.

US District Court Judge Brian C. Buescher issued a temporary restraining order against BMWED on the absurd grounds that workers did not face unsafe conditions due to COVID-19. "The COVID-19 pandemic does not present a 'hazardous safety or security condition related to the performance of the employee's duties.'"

Railroad workers have grueling schedules, often working over eight hours for extended periods as well as overnight shifts, raising the potential for accidents as

train crews become fatigued. The railroad companies have cut thousands of workers to shave costs and boost profits as train lengths and responsibilities have increased for smaller crews.

A BNSF railroad worker was killed on March 3 at 12:30 a.m. when he was pinned between a box car and locomotive at the La Mirada transit hub in Southern California. BNSF is a subsidiary of Warren Buffett's multinational conglomerate holding company Berkshire Hathaway.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), which is investigating the death, released a preliminary report on the events that led to the accident. "The boxcar on which the conductors were riding impinged the side of the rear-most locomotive, pinning and killing the conductor who was on the south-side ladder," according to the report, which attributed the accident to the "effects of fatigue and medical issues on railroad operating crews."

The NTSB has no regulatory authority and only reports the facts to the relevant agencies who choose whether or not to implement the recommendations.

A BNSF worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I have been with BNSF for 13 years. The conditions have never been great, considering I work for a billion dollar company. We are in the business of running trains, and that is what is on their mind, not protecting people.

"We have a pandemic, and cleanliness is at the front of everyone's mind, and it's hard not to notice how dirty these depots are, and we have multiple people across multiple states come in and out them everyday. They might be cleaned once a week, but often even less. They provide us some cleaning supplies, but not the time to do it."

"Workers know BNSF answers to Wall Street, and spending any extra even during the pandemic is out the question. But it's my hope for workers to rise up, and see each others' value, so that we can come together as one voice and save lives."



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