

Illinois locomotive engineer describes brutal scheduling, new attendance policy at BNSF

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24 January 2022

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Opposition is mounting among workers at freight railroad BNSF to a new points-based attendance policy which management has unilaterally implemented. Under the new policy, which is slated to take effect on February 1, workers will be charged points for any time off that they take. After a worker loses a certain number of points, he or she will face discipline, including termination. Workers have voted by an overwhelming margin in favor of strike action against the new policy.

David Manning, a locomotive engineer from Illinois, spoke to the World Socialist Web Site about BNSF's new policy, the mood among his coworkers, and the increasing pressure that the company is putting on its workers. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Erik Schreiber: How long have you worked for BNSF?

David Manning: I hired out in 2005 as a conductor. I worked as a conductor for a couple years, and I've been an engineer since 2008, so, a little over 16 years.

ES: What are your thoughts about the company in general?

DM: I can tell you that it's been 100 percent flipped since the time I hired out back in 2005. It used to be a pretty awesome job, but in the last five years, it's just completely gone downhill when it comes to morale and how they treat us. And it's just getting worse. Every other month, they shove something else into our face and force us to deal with it. It's getting to the point where guys who have been out here for 10-plus years are quitting. And it's a good-paying job. It's unheard of for somebody to quit something like this. People can't deal with it anymore.

ES: What are some of the things that the company's thrown at you?

DM: There's a huge list, but anything from low hours policy to performance issues to changing the rules, sometimes weekly. They make our jobs more difficult. Micromanaging us.

They've installed cameras. Virtually from the time we come to work to the time we leave, we're being observed. They installed cameras inside the locomotives, above our head. It literally watches over our shoulder 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There's zero privacy, unless you're going to the bathroom. They can see everything that we're doing. There's a huge issue with that in my mind.

They intentionally slow down trains now to preserve fuel. It's what they say, but in reality, it's just taking us longer and extending our hours on duty. I really don't know if it's actually saving that much fuel. For instance, a train that's good for 55 mph, they'll intentionally tell us that we can't run it over 40 mph that day because they think they can save 100 gallons of fuel from point A to point B, which could very well mean that we're stuck at work for three or four hours longer than what we would've been if they'd just let us go track speed.

The attendance policy keeps getting adapted. They came up with this thing called high-impact days. They could be any day of the week, but it started out as the holidays. This happened about a year and a half or two years ago. They started telling us that we could only take up to five a year

before we could be disciplined. Then they said, "Well, we can adjust these to any day that we think could be considered a high-impact day." They consider Super Bowl Sunday a high-impact day, because attendance, I guess, is an issue on those days. So, now people are afraid to take off holidays because they're going to get fired.

And they've integrated this high-impact day into this new availability policy that they're coming out with that will virtually eat half their points if they even take one of them off. There's so many things that are unrealistic and almost evil in this new policy that's going to force us just to be robots: either work for the railroad or just go home and rest so you can come back to work for the railroad. There'll be zero time for your family and anything else in general besides revolving your life around the railroad. And that's exactly what they want.

We just had a poll to strike between the UTU [a union now integrated into the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation union-Transportation Division, or SMART-TD] and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen [BLET]. From my understanding, it passed by almost 99.5 percent of the combined population of union members. That's more than just a bunch of railroaders crying about getting some time off. That's full-on impact. We're begging the company to negotiate something fairer with us. That's how much they respect us. They'd rather just tell us all, "No. You're going to do what you're told, or you're going to just go work somewhere else."

[BNSF has] already gone to court to put a stop to any kind of work action before it happens because of the Railway Labor Act [RLA]. They'll probably win because of two words: "major" and "minor." Any kind of dispute that's major, a union can take a work action and call a strike. But the person who gets to define that is a judge. Every time something's come up in the past, the judges usually side with the carrier and say it's a minor dispute, because if we go on strike, the economic impact can be catastrophic. None of us want that, but at the same time, the company has all the leverage.

With our company, they keep all this stuff a secret until they just impose it. We just got told about this about a week ago, and it's supposed to take effect on February 1. No way to plan for it.

ES: Do you have a predictable schedule with assigned days off?

DM: Absolutely not. I never know when I'm going to work until the phone rings. All I'm guaranteed is 10 hours off in between trips.

I'm on a rotating list of people. So, in my pool, we've got 25 guys on it. If it takes thirty-some hours for me to go all the way up to the first out on that list, the railroad considers that my time off, even though I have no way of planning for that time off or predicting it. It could have been 10 hours later I went to work. It all depends on the traffic and what's going on in the area.

The only way I can plan a doctor's appointment or something is if I take off a day before the doctor's appointment so I know I can be there. And that's what they're taking away from us. With this new policy, if I do

that, I could virtually be out of points and terminated within a month.

High-impact days cost you seven points. Let's say I have a doctor's appointment on Monday after Super Bowl Sunday. I have to take off Saturday to ensure that I can be there Monday. Saturday is another day that costs more points. I think weekend costs four points. Then, the high-impact day is on Sunday. There's seven. So, now we're at 11 points, and then I got to take off Monday, too, to be at the doctor's appointment. We're at 16 points right there. So, I'm almost halfway to being disciplined. I'm not going to get any more points back unless I'm physically available to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week for 14 days straight, without any lapse or break. You can see how that can turn into a pretty gruesome process pretty quickly.

In the previous policy, I was allowed to take up to five weekdays off a month and two weekend days. It's not like I could take Saturday and Sunday off. It would depend on when I took them off. Everything's in a 24-hour cycle. Say you have a kid and you get every other weekend. You're only going to see your kid once a month if you want to stay under that policy, because if you take off a Saturday and it falls into Sunday, even though you just took off one day, because that layoff on Saturday rolls into Sunday, that counts as two weekend days, even though you're only off for one 24-hour period. So, your weekend is dead right there.

There's been times when I've had to go a couple months without seeing him [his son] because of the existing policy. My son is 16. He's almost at the age where visitation doesn't matter all that much. But anybody in my situation with a kid younger, I really do feel sad for them. They're not going to have any option besides to pray that their significant other will maybe work with them on some other schedule. But any court-ordered schedule, like every other weekend, you're not going to be able to work out here. You're going to get fired, probably, within a couple months. And then, that insurance that you're required to have on your child can be taken away. Your child support, I mean. It can get deep pretty quick.

That's why we got 99 percent of my coworkers are ready to give everything we can to stop this. And our employer won't even budge. They won't even talk to us about it or consider any kind of middle ground, negotiation, anything. And it's all for some investor's pocketbook at the end of the day. That's all this is about.

ES: Are you working under an expired contract?

DM: [SMART-TD] has been without it for about three years, but for the RLA, they're still required to work on their expired contract until a new one is voted in. The BLET contract, I think, is also outdated ... maybe about a year or two. Both the unions and the employer are blaming the pandemic, but, realistically, they're almost always a couple years outdated before they're ever voted in by the membership.

ES: Which union do you belong to?

DM: I'm a member of the BLET, which is a part of the Teamsters.

ES: Are you in favor of a strike?

DM: Oh, yeah. My entire local was 100 percent in favor. There were zero no votes, which is unprecedented. There's always been one or two people against something, you know. People who are scared to go to that next step. But in this case, 100 percent of our membership in our local is ready to strike.

ES: How has the union responded to this poll?

DM: Basically, we're all on standby mode until the 25th or 26th, when a federal judge down in Texas is going to determine whether this is a major or minor dispute [UPDATE: Federal judge Mark Pittman issued a temporary restraining order against a strike on Tuesday]. In my opinion, the judge will probably favor the carrier again, we'll be forced to have this imposed on us, and probably a good—I hate to say it, but 30 to 50 percent of the workforce will probably end up fired or quit in the next year unless they change something.

Any changes they make are going to be of their own accord once this judge considers this a minor dispute. They see the outcry now, and

they're not willing to change anything now, so why would they change anything a year from now? They're perfectly content with this. They think it's fair and reasonable. But none of them do what we do. They work a nine-to-five schedule, weekends off.

I think it all revolves around the whole Precision Scheduled Railroading [PSR]. Hunter Harrison, the old CEO for CSX who passed away a couple years ago, came up with this idea, which involves cutting employees, getting rid of middle management, building bigger trains and doing more with less. The CSX adopted it. Well, in the beginning, it failed miserably. CSX was almost bankrupt. But now, certain railroads are taking parts of his plan and creating their own version of a PSR.

They went from building intermodal trains from a typical 6,000 to 7,000 feet long to where we're running them close to 16,000 feet long now to get rid of crews in between. They all have the one-man-crew thought in the back of their head. That's their ultimate goal. Probably in the next five to 10 years, they want one person on that train. If they could do it now, they would. So, imagine that: no time off in between trips. Now you have to come to work and work 12 hours by yourself.

They tried to do that five years ago, even, and the Federal Railroad Administration [FRA] didn't let them do it. But they keep pouring money into their technology. They have positive train control, they have auto control, where the train virtually drives itself. But it's not very accurate and doesn't work very well. A lot of times, you have to take it out because it messes up. Conductors are still very much needed because trains break. The knuckles break in between the cars. When that happens, they got to go back there and fix it. If I have to do that by myself, I'm going to have that crossing blocked or that town blocked for hours. A conductor can get it done within an hour, especially when they're building these 16,000-foot trains.

We have the highest divorce rate, I think, in the country. When it comes to our health, insomnia problems, mental health, divorces. We're going to go from seeing our kids once a month in my situation to maybe once every three or four months, just so you don't break some ridiculous policy they came up with overnight. I've been out here long enough, and I know my coworkers well enough. I don't think I'm going to last three months. I could see me being terminated within three to six months if this is imposed on us.

Even if we get Family and Medical Leave Act [FMLA]. You're not supposed to be disciplined on that. They think they found a loophole, I guess. You've got to be available for 14 days straight to get any points credited back to you. Well, if you got a doctor's appointment and you take off FMLA, you've got to restart your 14 days. They don't consider that discipline. Now, to me, there's consequences. If I take off FMLA, I've got to restart my 14 days, that's a consequence for taking off FMLA to go to a doctor. But they're not considering it that, because they're not counting it against you. They're just not letting it benefit you, either.

They [i.e., BNSF] think we're all overpaid. We've been compared to overpaid truck drivers. During this process, somebody in their labor relations was quoted as saying, "We gotta make these guys good employees or we gotta get rid of them." I took offense to that.

ES: How would you describe the work conditions you've faced during the pandemic?

DM: When the pandemic started, we were getting called heroes and all that stuff. The railroad was making money off this. They got FRA exemptions to override certain laws. Before, if I had a conductor and we had to go somewhere where he's never been before on the main line, the railroad would have to get him a pilot so that that pilot can work with him until he's qualified over there.

When this pandemic started, the railroad got an exemption and said, "Well, your engineer can be your pilot." This exemption just ended four months ago. They forced me for about a year and a half to be my conductor's pilot—to work two jobs. I wasn't getting paid a dime more for

it. The company was saving another crew member they'd have to pay to come out here and be this guy's guide. The money they profited from that systemwide is probably in the millions. So, they made money from this pandemic. That's just one exception.

They also came up with other exceptions that allowed them to start doubling up and tripling up trains that they weren't supposed to do before. There's a whole list of them. It seemed like they came up with a new one about every month until they expired.

They got an exemption on the air test. If a train is off air, it's not getting air pumped through its air system, because everything's air brakes on the train. If it's been off air for four hours, then somebody would have to put it back on air and physically inspect the train on both sides to make sure the brakes were working. They got that changed to 24 hours now. Now we have trains sitting out that are broken up, off air for 24 hours. If I rebuild that train at 23 hours, nobody has to inspect anything. That's leading to a lot of carmen losing their jobs and trains being inspected. You're already seeing the outcome of that with the increase in derailments and train compliance. And you're going to continue seeing it until they fix it. These trains went from being inspected quite often to maybe once between point A and point B in a 3,000-mile trip across the country.

We didn't see a bottle of sanitizer until probably six to seven months into the pandemic. They didn't start cleaning our cabs until maybe 10 months into it. They didn't enforce any mask requirements at all until about 10 months into it. And then the only time they cared was when the federal government was trying to enforce vaccinations. Then when they heard about the court rulings, they just gave up on that and said, "Never mind. We're not going to force you to do it now."

It's almost like they didn't care about the pandemic at all. The only ones that they cared about was management. They had them stop coming to the office and do everything on Zoom calls. When it comes to us, we were just told to continue coming to work. That's it. Like nothing was happening. If I didn't watch TV, didn't have social media or read a newspaper, and we were in the 1800s, I wouldn't even have known the pandemic was going on. I would have just kept coming to work. That's how they treated it. To this day, it's not any different.

One example: I had a guy riding on my train. He was deadheading [i.e., riding a train as a passenger] home from Chicago. He found out that he'd tested positive for COVID at the hotel. So, they just put him on our second motor to ride home with us. When we got to our terminal, I watched the crew that was going to take over get on that same motor where this guy with COVID had been. Nobody told them. So, they probably spent 10 hours on that motor that this guy'd just got off of, and nobody was there to sanitize it or even told them about it.

Let's put this into perspective. You know how they shut down the airlines because they didn't want people going in and out and traveling? I traveled almost every other day to Chicago and back. If I had COVID, or any of the 30 people who work in my pool, we would have continued doing that back and forth. There were no temperature checks. Nothing to prevent it. Nothing at all. We went to these public hotels. And you want to know what they wanted to do to us if we got sick? Fire us for taking too much time off!

It wasn't until about eight months in that they came up with a COVID protocol where they would pull you off for seven days, and it would just go against a medical [leave]. Before that, if you got sick and took three or four days off, if you went over their policy, you were going to get disciplined. And a lot of people did get fired during the pandemic until they came up with something. I can only imagine what's going to happen with this new policy, because COVID sure as hell hasn't gone away. And now more people are scared to even admit they have it. They're forced off. They're not getting any kind of compensation for it like everybody else was in the beginning. That'll tie into that 30 to 50 percent workforce reduction, you watch. This is not a good time to switch your career over to

the railroad, let's put it that way.

ES: What demands do you have of the company?

DM: I didn't sign up to work in a position where ... my life has to ... revolve around the railroad. None of us signed up for that. We were told that the railroad's going to own most of your time, but now they want the railroad to own almost all of your time. The only time you're going to get off is so you can rest to go back to work. I demand they change that. That's all I demand. Do not impose this on us.

I'd like to see something done in the courts to change the RLA. And I'd like to put that as a demand.

If you are a railroad worker at BNSF or another company, contact the WSWs with your comments.



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