

“I want to just be treated like a human!”—BNSF workers voice opposition to punishing schedules

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The World Socialist Web Site urges railroad workers to contact us with your comments.

Opposition is continuing to build among workers at the railway BNSF to a punitive new points-based “Hi-Viz” attendance policy. Under this policy, which is scheduled to take effect on February 1, workers will start with 30 points and lose points each time they take off from work, no matter the reason. After losing a certain number of points, workers will be subject to discipline, including termination.

Workers voted almost unanimously earlier this month to approve strike action against the new policy, which was imposed unilaterally by management. However, a federal court in Texas issued a temporary restraining order against strike action Tuesday, on the grounds that the policy, which would threaten to latch workers entirely to their jobs with no time left over for their families, was a “minor issue” over which workers are prohibited from striking by the reactionary Railway Labor Act.

Following the WSWs publication of a lengthy interview with a BNSF engineer, several other workers reached out to the WSWs to denounce the attendance policy. A worker with 17 years’ experience at BNSF said, “With the policy we have for attendance right now, I can go anywhere from four to six days at a time without seeing my family while they are awake. With the new policy, this will happen way more often.”

BNSF has claimed that its new attendance policy will make work schedules more predictable. But the worker explained that bad train line-ups force workers to take time off to get needed rest. “All the time, my schedule shows me not going to work until, say, 8:00 a.m. the next day,” he said. “Then, as soon as I lay down in bed at 10:00 p.m., they call me to go to work. Then I have to pull an all-nighter with no sleep because they can’t give me an accurate train schedule. They blame this on people calling in sick, but it has nothing to do with that. It is because the company won’t keep accurate train schedules.”

Moreover, the 30-point system is itself deceptive. “You really don’t have 30 points,” said the worker. “If you get called to work and get in a wreck on the way in, you will lose either 17 or 20 points. That means you always have to keep that many

points because you never know when you will get into an accident.”

Even under its current attendance policy, BNSF punishes workers not only for taking time off for medical appointments, but also for having medical emergencies. “Under the current system, I personally know a guy who was punished for taking off work when his wife had a *grand mal* seizure,” said the worker. “The company had no sympathy for him at all!”

“My quality of life is so horrible that I would gladly give up a raise in pay and even my health care if I could just be treated like a human!” the worker concluded.

A BNSF conductor from Kansas City, Missouri, told the *World Socialist Web Site* about how the unpredictable work schedule causes significant difficulties. “We don’t have set days off or a schedule,” he said. “I’m on call for most of my days. A lot of weeks, I’ll be called to go into work, and do a 12-hour trip, and have to spend nearly the equivalent amount of time in a hotel, and then head back.”

The long, irregular hours take a toll on workers’ personal lives. “It is extremely difficult to have a family,” said the conductor. “I’ve never known anyone else to have a job like this. It is so demanding on your time, knowing every time you go to work, you’ll never know when you’ll be home.” In this context, BNSF’s new attendance policy will limit the amount of time workers take off and “make an already bad situation worse,” he said. “I know a lot of people who are considering quitting because they don’t think they can actually work and live with the new point system.

“We’re going to come to work tired more often, and that’s a safety risk,” said the conductor. “Aside from moving nearly everything across the country, including stuff for UPS, FedEx, Amazon and things like cars, we also move dangerous hazmat material through towns.

“Part of our jobs is to inspect railway cars before we bring them into the yard. We check for liquid leaks, gas leaks, making sure everything is safe, making sure the railway cars aren’t messed up. The conductors do a lot of these checks. Being tired and not being alert on the job is going to create dangerous situations. I’m talking about hazmat leaks in

populated areas.”

Former BNSF employees described the punishing conditions that they had endured at the company. “I worked there 22 and a half years before I just could not take it anymore,” said one worker. “Could not even make doctor’s or dentist’s appointments for fear of being fired. It’s like a Hitler dictatorship—their way or the highway. And seems no one can stop them. They have too many smart lawyers. They hire the top ones in their class out of Harvard and Yale every year.”

Workers at other railroads told the *World Socialist Web Site* that they face the same pressures as BNSF workers and expressed their solidarity with them. “As a railroad crew member, myself and fellow employees were forced under a similar attendance policy approximately 18 months ago,” said one Union Pacific worker. “These policies are so restrictive and do not allow any regular schedule or family life whatsoever. We’ve lost several employees who fell victim to the constraints of this.”

Other workers resigned because of conditions like those at BNSF. “I used to work for Union Pacific railroad in Seattle, Washington,” said one worker. “I resigned on January 23 because of working conditions after eight years. We have almost an identical policy as BNSF.”

The BNSF employees are not “just crying and complaining,” said a worker who took a job at Norfolk Southern Railroad in 2005. “It was going to be my last job, and I loved working there,” he said. “Fast forward 15 years, and I couldn’t take it anymore.”

The railroads are conducting a relentless campaign to cut costs by reducing the workforce. “These railroads want to run all this freight with the least amount of people possible,” said the former Norfolk Southern worker. “The [workers] who try and stick it out are being absolutely punished. This job is taxing on your home life, social life, marriage, children’s lives and your body. I cannot stress to all of you enough about how strenuous and taxing the schedule of this job can be.

“If you truly love someone, steer them as far away as possible from working for any Class 1 railroad. The only reason the railroads are hiring like crazy is because they haven’t found a way to do it without them. ... These railroads don’t deserve hard workers like you. ... I quit the railroad after 15 years of service and haven’t looked back.”

CSX Transportation, another freight railroad, uses a point system like the one BNSF has introduced. “Our working conditions are deplorable—we have men that have quit in record numbers,” said one CSX worker. Resignations are not uncommon even among new hires because of the company’s treatment of the workforce. “It’s not from COVID or the great resignation, but those are convenient causes to blame. This started before either of those.”

The CSX worker referred to the Precision Scheduled Railroading (PSR) system that is being used to cut costs. “When questions arise,” said the worker, “they say they’re

following PSR strategy, and everyone says, ‘OK, that’s an involved plan that only railroad executives can understand, so I won’t question it.’ Is everyone blind to the fact it’s a term for fleecing a company? Thousands are suffering from the greed of a few dozen millionaires. Please help us, this story you wrote is old news to us, and we need to shed light on the industry.”

A retired rail worker put the current situation in the context of the workforce reductions of the past few decades. “In the early 1980s, the size of the train crew was reduced from four or five per train to three,” he said. “By the late 1980s, most trains were operated with two people. Most of the labor agreements included buyouts, up-front cash and incentive schemes for higher seniority workers. It was done through attrition.

“Along with attrition comes the incentive for the railroads to create poor working conditions,” the worker continued. “Make the job as nasty as they can, increasing the number of people who quit. The rail companies have been stuck at two people per train since, say, 1990. They increased ‘efficiency’ by greatly increasing train length or tonnage.”

A one-person crew has long been a goal of the industry. “There was a major push by the railroads to reduce the crew to one, starting 15 or 20 years ago,” said the retired worker. “This came to a screeching halt with the Lac-Mégantic oil tanker train disaster in Quebec, Canada, nine years ago. The incident involved a train with a one-person crew. I figured at the time that the disaster set the railroad’s pursuit of smaller crews back 10 years. As usual, they are ahead of me. Apparently, a little less than nine years is enough time for a town’s demise to be forgotten.”

The current harassment by the railroads is a resumption of their pursuit of the one-person crew, the retired worker continued. “Make the job unbearable. Make it easier to give up when the railroads come with their next crew reduction scheme. They will not be satisfied with one worker on a train. The technology has been around for many years for that two-mile long, 10,000-ton train running through your town to be operated remotely.”



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