

“If you can’t strike without going to jail, you have no bargaining power”

Former engineer describes dangerous and hostile conditions at BNSF

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The World Socialist Web Site urges railroad workers to contact us with your comments. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Workers at BNSF and other railroads have been contacting the World Socialist Web Site to express their opposition to the company’s new “Hi-Viz” attendance policy. A former BNSF worker, who wished to remain anonymous, recently described her experiences at the company to us. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Erik Schreiber: Where did you work for BNSF?

Anonymous Engineer: I hired out in North Dakota and I transferred out to Seattle in 2016.

ES: When did you first join the company?

AE: In 2014. I was 23 and ignorant. [Laughs.]

ES: You mentioned that you left the company. Was that in 2020?

AE: Yeah, 2020 was the time that I quit. It was January, right before all hell broke loose. It was a culmination of a bunch of [aggravation] leading up to a final rage. It was such a nightmare place to work, especially for women. The toilet situation is only the beginning of how it’s horrific for women out there. Especially for me as an engineer. The woman driver joke? Even if it’s said in passing, is it really appropriate? Not really. “Oh God, we have a woman backing up.” I was held to a higher standard. I either have to be the best engineer, or I’m the worst engineer, because I’m a woman in a man’s job.

ES: When you first started with BNSF, did you begin as a locomotive engineer?

AE: You have to start as a conductor. They do not hire off the street as an engineer. It’s a highly skilled job. I was lucky. They were looking for engineers shortly after I hired out, but you have to complete your training as a conductor first. Basically, the conductor is in charge of everything behind the motors. The engineer is in charge of everything in front of the cars. The conductor is the one that goes back and takes the hand brakes off the cars. He’s the one that does the air test in smaller terminals. He’s the one that goes back and inspects the cars if we go over a detector on the main line and it says, “Hey, you have a defect: Axle #124, left side.”

ES: How would you describe your work schedule?

AE: Trainmasters are supposed to work with management to come up with the train lineups, which are absolute trash. Something that’s been on the schedule for an entire day, all of a sudden, isn’t being called or is being pushed back and pushed back and pushed back. When they say it’s a 24 on call, they’re not kidding.

If you go more than 24 hours without being called, you get “reset.” What that means is the railroad and the Federal Railroad Administration [FRA] consider that your day off. And, according to the FRA, if you get six starts—meaning they call you, you go into work—if you get six of those

in a row—mind you, you have to be called before 24 hours—then you get 48 hours off at the end of your sixth start. If you get seven starts, then you get 36 hours off [Editor’s note: a current engineer has informed the WSWs that the federally-mandated off period is actually 72 hours]. That I’ve only had a couple of times, because it’s so rare. You have to be out of town, and then you get called, and on the way back, you could have seven starts after staying at a hotel. If you get called beyond 24 hours after, say, your third start, then that resets your start. You don’t go into your next day as a fourth start, you would start over as start one.

See how maddening that can be? You can go an entire month without a day off. And even if you get that magical 48 hours off, that’s not like your average nine-to-fiver’s weekend. If you clock out on 5 pm on a Friday, you don’t go back to work at 8 am on Monday. You go back to work at 5 pm Sunday. Your schedule is completely flipped. You go from working days to nights, and there’s no predictability.

I ended up getting so sick because my sleep was so messed up, I had to go on medication. I had to start seeing a psychiatrist. I was diagnosed with depression, PTSD. Every time my phone went off, my heart would just hammer, because I never knew what I was being called for. I could be called to go out of town. I could be called to go to the yard. I could be called to go on a local. Anything. That not knowing, after years and years, got to me so bad. Some people can handle it. I ended up not being able to. So many people quit because the lack of schedule just destroys their mental and physical health. I still have insomnia to this day. I still have anxiety to this day. I keep my phone on silent and have my watch vibrate instead. I have my calls coming on my watch because if my phone rings, my heart starts hammering again. And this is years later.

My husband is a pilot. He’s gone right now. With me on a 24/7 schedule and him gone, you can see how you can’t really start a family. You can’t find a babysitter to come and babysit. Say he’s out flying, and I get called. From the time my phone goes off, I have two hours to show up at the terminal. And I can’t find a babysitter at 2 in the morning. Who knows when I’m going to get back? I can’t give them a time. “Oh yeah, I’ll be back at this time.” And if I get called to go out of town, it can be several days.

We had to delay starting our family because of my job. I only know of one woman being pregnant while being an engineer. The only way she made it work was because she had enough seniority that she could hold a yard job and she could have a schedule.

The yard jobs do things like switch out the cars in the yard. They take the cars, and they build trains for local jobs. “Hey, these three cars go to this industry for scrap metal for this company.” Yard jobs do a lot. In those jobs, it’s an engineer and two switchmen, or two switchmen with a

remote, which is like a really big remote-controlled train set. It sounds really cool. In practice, it can be terrifying. [Laughs.] You have a remote box that's strapped to the front of you and you're literally playing a train set but with a 200,000-lb locomotive plus cars. [The pregnant worker] had a stay-at-home dad, and that's the only way that she could make it work, being pregnant out on the railroad.

I don't know if you ever heard of pregnant women having to pee every 10 minutes, but it is 100 percent true. Having gone through pregnancy, I cannot imagine being on the road as an engineer while pregnant. Climbing up onto the motor with a giant belly is dangerous, for one. If you get scraped on some rusty metal, which is everywhere, you'd have to get a tetanus shot and report it. Injuries are vastly underreported there. Nobody wants to go through that whole mess with management. So much stuff goes unreported there, it's horrible. But the stuff where somebody gets their finger chopped off, that stuff obviously gets reported. Thankfully, I never had to deal with any of that.

The worker explained the trauma of hitting a person who has decided to commit suicide by sitting on the tracks.

AE: You can go back to work the next day if you really want to. But if you want more than a couple of days off, you have to apply for the Family and Medical Leave Act [FMLA] and you have to get that approved. It's all unpaid. If you are truly mentally shattered from killing someone, which happens more often than you think ... if you can't afford to take the time off because of bills, then you're going back to work mentally shattered after you just killed someone, and other people are having to work with you knowing that you have this trauma that you're going through, but you can't afford to take the time off. It's messed up. I would never recommend anybody work for the railroad—any railroad—as they are right now. And, sadly, BNSF is actually the best of the worst.

ES: So, you're saying that companies like Union Pacific and CSX are worse?

AE: Right. They have worse schedules than BNSF, or so I've heard. And even Canadian Pacific, Canadian National, the two Canadian railroads that operate in the United States, they have even worse management.

And from what I have been told since I left—I still am in contact with some of my friends, who are conductors and engineers—since I left in the beginning of 2020, it has gotten exponentially worse at BNSF. They are more micromanaging. Everything that you do is recorded. Everything. It used to be that it was only the trains. It's like the black box, if you will, in a locomotive. It used to be only those recordings. "Hey, you went up a notch for throttle," or "You applied so many pounds of braking pressure." But now they have all these inward-facing cameras. Some of those cameras that BNSF installed are right above your head in the middle of the cab. Some of the CSX and Union Pacific locomotives have cameras literally staring you in the face. It's on the dash. As you're trying to do your job, you literally have a camera pointed at your face. Imagine trying to do your job with that. I'm sorry, no.

There are cameras absolutely everywhere. Even in the yard. Middle management will watch what time, which crews go out in the locomotive, and they'll watch when they come back in. They're timing you, how long it takes you to do work. They're at that level of micromanagement.

ES: Does BNSF have any kind of accommodations for workers who are pregnant?

AE: [Hearty laughter.] You think they give a crap? That's cute. They do not care! They don't have any accommodations. If she didn't have the seniority to hold that yard job, she would have had to take FMLA. There's no way. I asked in passing how that works. They said you can go into management. If you want to lose your soul to the devil, sure.

From firsthand accounts, I have talked to coworkers that started going into the management program, and they fly you out to Fort Worth. In their training program, they literally tell new management not to trust train

crew. They tell them that we act like children and that we are to be treated like children. We can't be trusted with anything. They are told all this crap to be in management. One guy told me, "I quit the management program because I couldn't sell my soul like that."

ES: You also mentioned unsanitary conditions on the job. What did you encounter?

AE: The toilets are horrific. I got called to be a hostler one day in the middle of summer. A hostler is an engineer or conductor who is trained to move power around. We refer to locomotives as "power." You are qualified to move just locomotives, no cars attached, between, say, Balmer Yard and Stacy Yard in Seattle. Or you grab power from the roundhouse, which is the shop or parking garage for locomotives, and bring it to the yard to put on a train.

Part of hostling power is inspecting the units. You sign the daily inspection card. "I inspected this unit at this time." Going through the power, I have seen some nasty stuff. You run into stuff like motors with toilets that haven't been serviced in months. I walked into units that literally smelled like something had died. I once walked into a unit. I opened the door. I took one step toward walking in, and I turned around, and I was standing over the railing, dry heaving for at least five minutes. It smelled like death. My eyes were watering. My nose was burning. It smelled like death. I don't know what died in that unit. I couldn't even inspect it, it was so bad. That's one example. We had to have it hosed down. I don't know what they do in the roundhouse to clean those units, but it was horrific.

ES: What have you heard about conditions during the pandemic?

AE: I don't know how it is with the mask policy now. You'd have to talk to somebody who actually is out there right now to know the mask policy, but I can imagine it's not very much enforced.

When I was there, if one person got sick, then that's how the plague traveled. I had to take Lysol wipes and wipe everything down that I would touch during the day before I started my day. That was the first thing I did. You get so sick out there because of all the germs. You don't have a single locomotive that you're working with. You work with everything. You work with every unit that you're told to work with. It's gross. That's how we didn't get sick, pre-pandemic. We had to wipe everything down.

Some people wouldn't even eat on a locomotive, because it's too gross. I totally get it. Some of the lead units that you'd walk into smelled horrible. Most of the time, I would eat lunch in the cab.

You don't get a lunch break a lot of the time. There's a certain claim that you can submit for a denied meal. If you got called for short-term service and you were denied a meal period, then you get a claim. Management being management, they denied every single claim. But you still submit it, and it's a whole process. You're supposed to get paid for not being able to take a lunch. But they never paid it, even though it's in the contract.

Management, I know for a fact, is told, at least in Seattle, to deny all claims, no matter how valid they are, because if it all goes to arbitration for the unions and management to hash out, then oftentimes, they'll get a "discount." The unions have a stack of papers for lunch claims, and they say, "Okay, we'll let you throw away these lunch claims as not valid if you pay these other claims. Oftentimes, people with low seniority are on the extra board, and those are ones that get the short-term calls. So, people with lower seniority are oftentimes the ones that have their claims denied, while people with higher seniority are the ones that get those claims paid, even if at a discount. They'll say, "Okay, we'll pay 90 percent rate on those valid claims." It's messed up. It's money that the company owes, but they're choosing to violate the contract. But there's no consequences. There's no accountability.

ES: And this is being enabled by the union.

AE: Yeah.

ES: Our position on the unions is that they can no longer be considered

workers' organizations. Since at least the PATCO strike in 1981, they have integrated themselves more and more into management and into the state. They help the companies impose concessions on workers. Union bureaucrats sit on company boards and hold stock in these companies. The union bureaucracies depend on the exploitation of the workers.

AE: Yeah, it's sickening. You're exactly right. They're playing games with the workers. There are some people in the unions who are genuinely good people. They try for all workers, and I commend those people. At the same time, there's so much corruption. There's so much wheeling and dealing between valid claims and pay rates. I still think the company owes me close to 30 grand in valid claims that I'm never going to see. I probably saw only \$1,500 out of the \$20,000 in the claims that they owe me for the one problem when I transferred. The company doesn't treat it as a valid claim, even though it is.

ES: Our position is that workers need to break from the unions and form new organizations, because the unions cannot be reformed. We say that workers need to form rank-and-file committees to fight for their objective needs.

AE: Yeah, it's getting to that point. At this point, the fact that they're willing to strike finally is a *huge* step. It is huge. They should've had a strike years ago. I remember specifically asking our local, "Hey, we need to strike about this," and I got laughed at. "Oh, it's not possible because this person, that person will go to jail because it's illegal for us to strike." So why the hell have a union? We have no bargaining power anymore. If you can't strike without going to jail, you have no bargaining power. There's no incentive for management to cooperate. There's no accountability. They fear nothing. The term "being railroaded" exists for a reason. It's such a hostile work environment between union workers and management.



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