

Opposition growing among BNSF workers one week after management imposes draconian new “Hi-Viz” policy

Tom Hall
9 February 2022

Opposition is growing among BNSF railroad workers to the punitive new “Hi-Viz” attendance policy, which management unilaterally imposed on February 1. Roughly 17,000 workers in the SMART-TD and BLET unions had voted overwhelmingly to strike against the new policy, but a temporary restraining order against strike action was issued by a federal judge last month, paving the way for the policy to be implemented last week. Yesterday, judge Mark Pittman extended the temporary restraining order through February 22, a move that was widely expected.

Workers at the railroad are already on call 24/7, leaving them unable to plan out their personal schedules, spend time with family or even schedule doctor’s appointments. The new points-based attendance policy would bind them even more tightly to the unpredictable, long working hours set by management.

One worker described how the new points system looks in practice. “I took a couple of days off this past week due to health reasons,” he said. “I burned up five [out of 30] points, and it will take me a month and a half to earn back those two days off.” If workers use all 30 points, they are subject to disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal. “In order to earn two points back, you have to be on call for 14 days, 24/7.”

The erratic character of the scheduling itself, one worker said, “is worse than it was before Hi-Viz. It’s almost like they’re intentionally messing with it to alter data for future court cases. There’s something shady going on.”

The new policy also lays the groundwork for BNSF to fire experienced, higher-seniority workers on attendance grounds, or pressure them into resigning.

Figures compiled by an anonymous railroad worker shows a sharp increase in resignations after the Hi-Viz policy was announced and then implemented.

The new policy is taking its toll not only on BNSF workers but on their families. Over the weekend, roughly 50 family members of BNSF workers protested the policy near a BNSF facility in Needles, California. Similar protests have also taken place in Fort Worth, Texas, outside the federal courthouse where the restraining order was issued.

The wife of a BNSF engineer told the WSW of the conditions her husband is facing. “He said morale is down. The impression is BNSF and the unions haven’t listened to the staff at all. He said there is a lot of frustration because of that. The employees feel neglected and as though their concerns have gone unheard.

“No one in our terminal has quit yet, but there are several people talking about it and looking for other opportunities. There have, however, been a few employees who have quit at a neighboring terminal. The new policy has definitely made work less enjoyable due to the added stress of this point system.

“There is a reason that three of the top five worst companies to work for, rated by Forbes in 2021, were tier 1 railroads. They all have a similar point system. As it stands currently, BNSF’s is the most restrictive of any tier 1 railroad and on par to join their brothers on that list. Every single rail employee I know who is affected by this point system is no longer touting the railroad as a career you can retire from. It is simply a job, a steppingstone to something better. They are urging their children to find a different profession. It is no longer the fruitful career it once was. I imagine you

will no longer see generations of families working for the rails if this system doesn't change as it currently stands."

A current BNSF worker in the Pacific Northwest told the WSWs: "I'm worried that I'm not able to see my family regularly, my kids are basically being raised in a single-parent household and that is detrimental to their well-being.

"Many of my coworkers are looking for other jobs. There are several jobs in the area that would pay similar to what they'd make on their trip rate, without having to be away from their home and families. Often, we will sit in a hotel room for days without seeing our family and also not being paid because we aren't on a trip.

"We've gone a little over two years without a new contract in the SMART-TD union. The last contract went through, and workers only got a percentage of what they were supposed to because it would cut into the railroad's profits.

"There is total corruption in the union. By the time we settle this cost-of-living raise, it'll be time for the next one and we're always behind rising costs. When something goes awry, the communities pay the price. Union bureaucrats, as long as they don't have to come out here and work, they're separated from the rank and file.

"The reason why the company and unions don't want us to strike is because of the pandemic and they really need us. The sanitation on the trains is horrific, the panels are so dirty sometimes you can see your own handprint if you touch something. Yet this pandemic is suddenly made our problem, and we are being furloughed and brought back, furloughed and brought back again and again. No one can live like that.

"Several of my co-workers are out sick with COVID. The company blames the pandemic for what was an issue [manpower] even before the pandemic. They've cut their manpower down so far that unless they do one-man trains, they'll have to cut profits for shareholders. They're not willing to provide relief for the pandemic such as mask requirements and cleaning.

"They build 8,000- or 9,000-foot trains with not even a quarter of the yardmen that they used to have. There's no siding big enough for these jumbo trains. They send one big train with 2-3 regular-sized train crews sitting and waiting for the big train to get by so

they can get home to see their families. Crews are often on a train for 12 hours, in a hotel for 24 hours, then a train for 12 hours and so on.

"The customer pays for it too; six trains wait for the one big train to get out of the way sometimes. The infrastructure is not there for these long trains. Maintenance, car men working the tracks, everything is behind, even though they get millions of dollars in federal funds to keep up the infrastructure. Where is this money going?"

The worker described corporate America and the railroad shareholders as "basically the puppet masters controlling everything around my job site. When are we going to invest in the infrastructure again? Instead, it's all about quarterly profits. Until they start shutting down and investing in sanitation and vaccines, etc., we're going to keep seeing planes and trains go from one part of the world to the other and spread this virus and it's going to continue being a plague."



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)