

“The consensus is that the unions are in the railroad’s pocket”

Wife of locomotive engineer describes BNSF’s toll on family life

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Opposition to freight carrier BNSF’s punitive new “Hi-Viz” attendance policy is growing. This new points-based policy already is having a negative effect not only on workers themselves but also on their families.

The wife of a BNSF engineer from Montana recently contacted the *World Socialist Web Site*. Requesting anonymity, she described the decline of working conditions at the company over time, the effects of the new attendance policy on family life and the unions’ collaboration with the railroad. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Erik Schreiber: Many workers have described their hours as burdensome and difficult to live with. You said that the pay used to compensate for the awful hours but no longer does. Could you expand on that?

Wife of BNSF worker: I feel fortunate because my husband has a job with the railroad that affords me the ability to stay home with our children. That being said, the hours my husband works also prohibit me from finding a traditional job, because if I were to do that, I would need full-time day care, which would essentially negate any income I would earn. So, while it’s a blessing, the hours themselves prohibit any sort of scheduling.

We really don’t know 100 percent day to day when he’s going to be home. Having me home so that he can spend time with his children when he’s able to be home is our best option.

ES: The contract, as you mentioned before, expired in 2019. How has that affected the family?

W: We haven’t seen a cost-of-living increase or any pay increase in that time, and with the way the economy is, the cost of everything else has continued to rise, except our salary. We’ve had to do some creative budgeting, since I don’t work, to maintain our home and our bills and make sure that we’re able to maintain a life for our children. Because of his income, we don’t qualify for any state aid. A gallon of milk is over \$3.00 now, where a couple years ago, it was \$2.50. Now, that may not seem like a lot, but when you have a family, every little bit adds up. When you’re in a one-income household, it really makes a bigger impact than people realize.

ES: Since the Hi-Viz attendance policy was introduced, some workers have already left the company. Has your husband seen any people leaving?

W: If he has, he has not mentioned it, although it does not surprise me. Where my husband works is considered a smaller terminal in the grand scheme of the railroad. And so, the area in which we live is definitely more remote. Good-paying jobs are hard to find. They’re few and far

between. So, unfortunately, the people who work out of our terminal and the terminals nearby don’t have a ready option where they can just quit and go somewhere else and make the same money they’re making currently. From my understanding, they’re stuck between a rock and a hard place. Either you bend over and take it so you can continue to provide for your family, or you quit, hope you can find a job that allows you to pay your bills, and you keep your fingers crossed that you can scrape by. It’s not an ideal situation.

There have been several memes circulating that claim that BNSF stands for “better not start a family.”

ES: Speaking of family, you said that your father-in-law worked for BNSF.

W: Yeah, he did. My father-in-law retired with BNSF.

ES: When did he start working at the company?

W: Probably the late ’60s, early ’70s.

ES: What changes did he observe since that time?

W: When he first started working for the railroad, there used to be three men on each train. There was a fireman, who sat in the back of the train; there was a conductor, who sat as a passenger, and there was an engineer, who drove the train. During his time, they did away with the fireman position. That job became obsolete due to technology.

Also, when he first started with the railroad, they had crew callers. They knew which trains were coming in at what time and would put the people on the trains as they came in. They would work with other crew callers from other stations or other depots. It was a coordinated effort. They used to have crew callers at every terminal. It was not a centralized calling system.

It seems like communication probably was much better then than it is now. You’ve got a crew caller down in Texas or Kansas City, I’m not sure which, who calls trains for the entire nation. You can’t tell me that somebody who lives in Texas knows what [it’s like for] somebody in South Dakota, what their weather’s like or what their trains are doing. All they do is see a little dot on a screen. They don’t have the experience of the area or the way the trains run. A train is going to run differently in Texas than it will in the middle of Idaho when it’s 40 below and snowing. But you’ve got to get to where you’re going on time, and you’ve got to save fuel, and you’ve got to follow the rules. It doesn’t matter what the weather outside is. “Oh, 40 below? That’s okay, we’ll just make the conductor layer up. It’ll be fine.”

When my father-in-law first started, if you needed time off, all you had to do was call the crew caller and say, “Hey, I got this going on. I need some time off.” They’d say, “Oh, okay.” They always had enough staff to cover. You could take, I think it was up to three months off at a time, without losing your job. Now, it would be unpaid, and unless you had three months’ vacation, you didn’t [take it]. You could take an entire

month off of work and just say, "Hey, I'm ready to come back to work," and your job would be waiting for you, because they didn't consider your job abandoned until, I think, the 90-day mark.

Now, you miss one call, you lose 15 points! That's half your entire point value you're given for the rest of your career. So, that personal touch, that human factor, that empathy has gone completely away for profit.

ES: How does your husband's job affect his relationship with the family?

W: My husband and I have three children. One of our children just had her ninth birthday. She was in tears, because she didn't know whether Daddy was going to be home for her birthday or not, because his schedule is so unpredictable. We don't know from day to day if he's going to be home for sure. We can guess, but it's often wrong. And so, he's missed a lot of milestones. He's missed a lot of firsts, because he had to be working. He's the breadwinner for our family, and so that's part of the sacrifice he makes so that we can have the life we do, which I'm very appreciative for. But it would be nice to not have to worry about his employment if he wanted to take time off to be at my daughter's birthday party.

My youngest son had to have surgery, and we were nervous that he wasn't going to meet availability guidelines if he took too much time off so that we could go to doctor's appointments 300 miles away. Where we live is very remote. We had to travel for a day just to get to the doctor my son needed to see prior to the surgery. Of course, you need initial visits, follow-ups and consults and all these things before you can even schedule the surgery. Now with this new Hi-Viz point system, that would be left entirely up to me. He would not be able to take that time off. There's no forgiveness with this new system.

ES: Under the previous system, it still was difficult, wasn't it?

W: It was still difficult, but it was more manageable because we have a way of looking and kind of figuring. It posed its own unique set of challenges. If we made the appointment for Wednesday morning, and, for whatever reason, they held him at the away-from-home terminal too long, then he wouldn't even make it home before we had to leave. So, then I'm stuck either driving by myself or rescheduling the appointment.

With the old system, for him to be home for those appointments, he would take Tuesday off and take Wednesday off. So, that would've been two of the five weekdays in a month he was allotted. But now, if he were to take Tuesday and Wednesday off, he would lose two points each day. It's my understanding that he would lose an additional two points because he took two days in a row off. So, he would be losing out on six points. He'd have to work 28 days straight to make up that ding that he got just so my son could attend one doctor's appointment. It's put a bigger burden on us wives and spouses than was there previously.

ES: Do you have greater responsibilities as a result of him being away so often and having such an unpredictable schedule?

W: Right. Under the old system, we were able to sort of navigate him taking time off, and it was usually for things that were necessary: dentist's appointments or doctor's appointments. I have a son who's in occupational therapy, and he has an appointment for that every week. That's on top of our kids' activities: gymnastics, hockey and piano lessons. On top of that is school and afterschool activities if they want to participate.

If I needed him home, I could say, "Hey, babe, I really could use you home next Thursday. Can we try to make that happen?" He could look and he could take time off Wednesday and Thursday. He always had to take the day before, because if you went to work Wednesday morning, you weren't guaranteed to be home on Thursday. So, he'd have to take the day before off as well. Under the old system, at least we knew if he had the availability to do it. We knew that he could do it as long as he didn't take off too much aside from those two days.

But now, if you take two days off in a row, you're dinged a minimum of five points. You earn four points back every 14 consecutive days you work. If you lose five, six points for taking two weekdays off, then you're working 28 consecutive days just to earn those back. It's really prohibiting us from getting him the time off that would be the most helpful in our family life.

So, it's put a bigger burden on me to make sure that I'm my best self so that I can manage all this alone. I feel like it was difficult before, but I feel more like a single parent now than I ever have. That's why the railroad, I've been told, has one of the highest divorce rates of any profession in the country.

ES: Does your husband belong to BLET or to SMART-TD?

W: SMART-TD, although he has thought about switching. But either way, the railroad workers around here aren't too impressed with either union at the moment.

ES: What are they saying about the unions?

W: From what I'm hearing, the consensus is that the unions are in the railroad's pocket. The unions aren't in it for the workers anymore, they're just in it for the profits and the kickbacks that the company gives them when they bow down and let the company do what it wants. I feel like there may be some truth to that. Why are we, three years later, still without a renewed contract? Where's the urgency? Where's the push for the workers? It doesn't feel like there is one. It wasn't until this Hi-Viz came out that they really started doing anything worthwhile in recent history for the workers. And even that effort seems kind of halfhearted, because the Hi-Viz went into effect anyway.

They did file a countersuit to prevent the restraining order from being put into effect. They filed a restraining order against BNSF late on a Friday, and it was not ruled on prior to February 1, and because of that, it was put into effect. So, the union, it looks like, made a halfhearted attempt to appease its members. The fact that Hi-Viz is still in effect and points are still being deducted [raises the question of] what's the point of doing that was. You clearly haven't pushed hard enough, in my opinion.

ES: What's your thought about the unions' insistence that workers not speak to the media?

W: Oh, I think that's complete and utter BS. I am not an employee. I am not a union member. So, I'm not sure how they can legally or legitimately penalize my husband when I'm exercising my freedom of speech.

ES: Even beyond that, why should your husband's right to freedom of speech be infringed?

W: It shouldn't be. And I think, ultimately, the railroad's worried about bad press, and they should be, because this is complete bull crap.

I've heard other wives say something like, "Well, you should try being a military wife." But when you sign up for the military, you know you're signing up to potentially go to war and be away from home for months at a time. When you sign up for the railroad, you aren't signing up for that same lifestyle, but you're being treated very similarly. If I wanted to marry a soldier, I would have.

ES: The restraining order enjoins workers from advocating or promoting a strike. But the restraining order does not forbid workers to make any statement at all. This is something that the unions are enforcing.

W: Right, the unions requested that they not say anything. Again, I think it's because they're afraid of the bad press, because the unions aren't doing what they should be doing, either. At least I hope that's why they're asking the members to stay quiet. I hope there's not some other backhanded, behind-closed-doors, let-me-pad-your-pocket-a-little-deeper-type reason.

ES: You were talking about the experience of your father-in-law, and the unions themselves are not the same organizations as they were when they were founded.

W: No, not even close.

ES: What are your observations about that?

W: It's a feeling. I don't have any hard evidence. But when my father-in-law was younger, when he was on the railroad, they were more concerned with workers' rights, making sure that they got home to see their loved ones. Now, it feels like the unions are more in it for the profit, the bottom dollar, and to help pacify the employees so the company can do what it wants to try to help increase profits.

ES: Our position on the unions is that they have, at least since the PATCO strike in 1981, integrated themselves more and more into the companies with which they were supposed to be negotiating. Union bureaucrats now sit on company boards and hold company stock.

W: That seems like a conflict of interest. It's no different than the people in Congress, our representatives, trading stock that they have a hand in.

ES: Yes, I'm sure you've read about the senators who got inside information about the pandemic before it was made public and then sold stock and made handsome profits.

W: Oh, absolutely. I'd like to be able to get some of that information, but apparently insider trading is illegal for us common people.

ES: This raises the question of the Biden administration, and both parties, promoting the unions. You might remember that last year, when the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union announced that it was going to try to organize an Amazon warehouse in Alabama, President Biden came out and gave open support to this campaign—something that no president had previously done. What do you think that signifies?

W: To me, that just screams that there's money being traded behind closed doors, out of the public eye. Why now, when it's never happened before?

ES: BNSF is one of the most important freight carriers in the country. It plays a crucial role in the supply chain. Of course, that is of concern to the Biden administration.

W: Oh, absolutely. And they should be concerned. If there was a strike, and even if the last strike lasted less than 24 hours, it would have such a heavy impact on the economy. I know that I've heard from multiple employees that they don't want to disrupt the supply chain. They don't want to contribute to the problem. But their desire for adequate working conditions outweighs the desire to keep things status quo. And so, while they would feel bad, or even maybe a little guilty, for disrupting the supply chain and causing problems, it's not worth their health, sanity and job safety. Every worker I've talked to is willing to strike because of that.

ES: How do you and your husband feel about the prospect of a strike?

W: We are for it. If we get word to strike, I already am planning on making meals for those on the picket line. We are 100 percent in support of a strike if a reasonable agreement can't be reached.

ES: I think there would be tremendous support within the rest of the working class if BNSF workers went on strike. Since we've been publishing articles about the Hi-Viz policy and the current situation, many workers have been reaching out to us and describing similar experiences. These articles have been receiving a wide readership.

W: Good. I'm glad to hear that. I hope there's support. I hope people can see that these are men and women with lives, and they're not just robots who have sold their souls to the railroad to work. They're moms and they're dads, and they're sons and daughters, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters who have lives beyond jobs. While we knew signing up with the railroad was a lifestyle in and of itself, we didn't sign up to be married or indebted to the railroad. We expect some scheduling difficulties, and we expect my husband to be away from home and miss out on some things. We're not asking for a nine to five. That's never going to be a possibility, and we understand that. But make it possible to have a life outside of work without being penalized for it.

ES: Do you have other demands?

W: Of course, we want to maintain two-man crews. That is an absolute

in my mind. A pay raise would be really well received at this point in our lives.

Honestly, we'd like to see a better management of the train lineups, which is the schedules that are used to predict when people may go to work. Right now, it is wildly inaccurate. For example, we had a hockey game out of town, and my husband got home Thursday night and looked at the train lineup. It didn't look like he would be called for work until Sunday night. He had a vacation day in starting Sunday morning. We figured we should be good, so he could come watch his son play hockey.

So, we left. He looked again Friday morning, before we left town. Again, it showed the same thing. It looked like he was going to get called to go to work Sunday night, and he had a vacation day starting Sunday morning. So, there was a 12-hour difference between when he was going to have time off starting and when he looked like he was going to get called for work. So, we figured that was enough of a buffer. We should be good.

So, we left town. It took us about three and a half hours to get to our destination. Thirty minutes after we get there, he gets called for work—more than 36 hours before he was scheduled to go. So, he had to lay off on call. Now, this was prior to Hi-Viz, so he didn't lose 15 points. He would have, though, if it had been after February 1. But it was because the train lineup, the prediction software they use was so inaccurate, they called him so wildly early that he had no other choice. It's that example right there that's affecting people throughout this company.

ES: We were talking before about the unions and their halfhearted efforts, as you put it. What do you think about the idea of workers taking the initiative independently of the unions?

W: I support that 100 percent. My husband and I have talked a little bit about that. I forget the term he used, but you can basically relegate your union dues to a nonprofit charity if you've chosen to vacate both unions. We've talked about doing that, too. He says, "Why am I paying \$221 a month in union dues?" Why are we paying that and being treated this way? It doesn't add up.

ES: The organizational form that we advocate is the rank-and-file committee. Our position is that the unions can no longer be considered workers' organizations. Workers need to break from them. They still need to organize, but independently of the unions and of both political parties.

W: Right. I don't disagree with that at all. I know my husband's not alone in his distrust and disgust with the current situation and the unions' part to play in it. When the union you're paying into can't provide the things you need anymore, what else do you do?



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