

Organize a counteroffensive against Hi Viz and the anti-strike injunction! Join the BNSF Workers Rank-and-File Committee!

The BNSF Workers Rank-and-File Committee
18 February 2022

To join the BNSF Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email bnsfwrfc@gmail.com.

Dear Brothers and Sisters at BNSF and all other railroad workers,

We, the conductors and engineers at BNSF, call upon our coworkers and our supporters in the working class to organize an all-out fight against the slave-labor “Hi-Viz” attendance policy and the court injunction banning strike action against it.

Even before Hi Viz took effect on February 1, we were already at the 24/7 beck and call of management, who forced us to sacrifice on BNSF’s behalf time with our children and even doctors’ appointments. We have been running ragged for 12 or more hours a day, often with little to no rest. The new policy, under which we will only get 30 attendance points for the rest of our careers, will put our entire lives under the control of the railroad. Through this policy the company also clearly aims at forcing out older, higher-seniority workers and replacing them with younger, lower-paid replacements.

BNSF’s Wall Street owner Berkshire Hathaway, together with the owners of the other Class I railroads, have driven the country’s railroad infrastructure into the ground through their drive to squeeze every last cent out of the workforce. Maintenance of the aging lines has been slashed to the bone, with only a couple of people on maintenance crews which used to have more than a dozen. Trains are longer than they have ever been, stretching 15,000 feet in many cases, but are being operated by only two-person crews, with one-man crews the stated near-term goal of all the railroads.

This creates dangerous conditions which lead to accidents, including rail breakages and derailments, including three deaths over the past year, with the most recent occurring on February 9 in Denver.

Far from organizing a fight against this, the BLET and SMART-TD unions are dutifully enforcing the injunction in the most expansive way possible, claiming that it bans us from speaking up. They are keeping us in the dark, telling us to let the legal process play out which has been stacked for 100 years in favor of the companies. At the same time, the unions have kept us and more than 100,000 of our brothers and sisters at the other Class I railroads on the job for more than two years without a contract while the railroads accelerate their cost-cutting drive.

Management is ~~wanting~~ exactly ~~fact~~ that priced lawyers can’t help but gloat that every court ruling in decades has been in the companies’ favor. In fact, the entire framework of federal labor law, and in particular the Railway Labor Act passed in 1926, is designed to eliminate strikes and keep workers running in circles while talks and “mediation” go on forever while they get poorer in the meantime. Such is the case in the current contract negotiations, which have gone on for two years with nothing to show for it.

The best that can be said about the unions is that they have worked out a bankrupt strategy without consulting us and behind closed doors. The worst is that they welcomed the strikebreaking injunction and are deliberately using the court case as a smokescreen for their collaboration with management in enforcing the new policy. Either way, workers ourselves must insist that only we have the right to decide what our strategy will be!

What we fight for

The unions long ago abandoned any allegiance to workers’ need and replaced the methods of the class struggle with the self-serving program of class collaboration. Therefore, we have founded the BNSF Workers Rank-and-File Committee to organize railway workers ourselves as an alternative source of power against management, well-heeled union bureaucrats and “government by injunction.”

The fight against Hi Viz is only the first step in the fight to restore decent working conditions on the railroads. In addition to the immediate repeal of Hi Viz, we also demand the following in our new contract:

- A 30 percent wage increase, with full COLA to compensate for 7.5 percent inflation.
- The rational structuring of train lineups. No more being blindsided by being called into work at the last second. An end to scheduling using “super-pools” which leads to more unpredictable schedules and higher levels of fatigue.
- Guaranteed two days off each week.
- The removal of surveillance cameras from locomotive cabins.

- The re-imposition of *three* person crews for safety is the most “pro-union” president in American history.” But he does not mean the workers in the unions, he means the union executives. His plan is to extend the type of incestuous relationship between the unions, management and the government which has long existed in the railroad industry to suppress the opposition of workers.

- Control by workers ourselves over scheduling, the pace of work and health and safety. In the case of COVID-19 outbreaks, workers collectively must have the authority to shut down trains and railyard operations if it is unsafe.

- A sharp increase in hiring, with full wages and benefits in order to reduce workloads.

- The abolition of the RLA and other strikebreaking and dictatorial measures.

These demands are based on what we and our families need, not with what management or union officials say is “affordable.” What can or cannot be achieved will only be decided in struggle.

The BNSF Rank-and-File Committee will be a fighting organization and a real voice for workers. We will not bow to the authority of union officials whose sole concern is not bucking the system and advancing their lucrative careers. We will establish lines of communication between railyards and with workers in the other railroads. We will expose the attacks against us and keep workers informed.

To ensure the committee will fight on these principles, its work will be organized along the following guidelines:

- The complete independence of the committee from the union apparatus. Membership is not open to current or former union officials. The committee is organized and controlled by workers ourselves, not an army of petty functionaries who have not stepped foot in a locomotive in decades, if at all. This is the only way to ensure free, open and democratic discussion and to prevent spies and the victimization of militant workers. Everything depends on the independent initiative of workers ourselves.

- The independence of the committee from both big business parties and the corporate-controlled government. There is no political “litmus test” to joining and we welcome workers of diverse political opinions. But begging the Biden administration, its Republican opponents or federal courts and mediators to swoop in on our behalf is a dead end. Aligning with either one of these parties ties the hands of workers and forces us to limit our demands to what is acceptable to our class enemies.

Unite the working class behind BNSF workers!

BNSF is a major battleground for the entire working class, and victory here will embolden workers everywhere. At stake is nothing less than an attempt to establish an unrestrained management dictatorship. In his ruling, Judge Pittman justified the injunction by citing the supposed “need” to keep supply chains running. This is an attack on the rights of workers everywhere, which are held to be less important than the supposed “right” to profits of BNSF owner Warren Buffett or his fellow billionaire Bill Gates, the majority owner of CN.

The Biden administration, which threatened last year to use the National Guard to keep West Coast ports open, is working on the same basic principle as this Trump-appointed judge. Biden says he

is the most “pro-union” president in American history.” But he does not mean the workers in the unions, he means the union executives. His plan is to extend the type of incestuous relationship between the unions, management and the government which has long existed in the railroad industry to suppress the opposition of workers.

Our committee will strive to organize and unite workers across every terminal in the BNSF system, from Alabama to California, so that workers ourselves can develop a common strategy and plan joint actions.

We will also appeal to our most powerful allies, the international working class, for support. In particular, we will appeal to the 30,000 oil refinery workers, who are being forced to work as long as 16 hours a day, 13 days in a row, who want to strike but are being strung out on rolling contract extensions by the United Steelworkers. The oil and gas companies are making billions from rising oil costs, but are demanding wage increases be limited to 2 or 3 percent, less than half the rate of inflation.

Workers everywhere are fighting against longer working hours, the erosion of pay due to inflation and against mass infection. We will appeal for active support and collaboration from not only workers in the other Class I carriers who are facing similar attendance policies, but autoworkers, oil workers and others.

We will also make a particular appeal to workers in other countries. Around the world, many workers are also facing anti-strike injunctions, including health care workers in Australia and in Sri Lanka, who have defied court bans and gone on strike anyway. We have the same interests as workers in other countries because we are all fighting against global corporations embedded in global supply chains. We move goods from across the world on our trains, and two of the seven Class I railroads in the US are based in Canada. The Class I rail network extends beyond the borders of the United States, from northern Canada to Veracruz, Mexico.

We will conduct this work within the framework of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, founded last year to coordinate the work of rank-and-file committees on a global scale.

We urge all those who agree with this statement to join us in building the BNSF Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Email us at bnsfwrfc@gmail.com.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact