

“They’re maximizing profits and cutting back on workers”

Canadian CP Rail worker speaks out against brutal working conditions

Roger Jordan
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Do you work at CP Rail? Contact us to join the struggle to build a rank-and-file committee to take forward the fight of railroaders across North America for better wages and working conditions.

CP Rail, Canada’s second-largest and North America’s sixth-largest rail company, filed a 72-hour lockout notice against 3,000 engine drivers, conductors, and yardmen Wednesday. The company, with the approval of the federal Trudeau government, is trying to reinforce the ruthless regime of exploitation in order to protect corporate profits and shareholder payouts.

Dozens of business organizations have signed a letter calling on the Liberal government to intervene and impose a pro-employer settlement on the workers, who voted overwhelmingly for strike action last month. Meanwhile, after keeping workers in the dark about their closed-door talks with CP Rail, the Teamsters union belatedly issued a strike notice Thursday night. This move has little practical significance, given that workers can only legally walk off the job 24 hours after the lockout begins.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke Thursday to a conductor at CP Rail, who described his working conditions, his views on the Teamsters union, and his demands for the current struggle. He requested that we keep his identity anonymous for fear of retribution.

World Socialist Web Site: Could you describe your working conditions at CP Rail?

Rail worker: I’m a conductor and part of an operating crew. This is an on-call job. You get a call two hours before you have to go to work. On conclusion of a “tour of duty,” which is one trip away from home and one trip back home, you can book 24 hours of personal time off.

You get called on a first in, first out basis. So when you return from a “tour of duty,” you go to the bottom of the list and work your way back up. This means that you’re totally reliant on the company providing an accurate lineup of trains, so that you know when you’ll have to work. For example, if I’d made my way to the top of the list, I would be looking at the next train on the lineup, and I might go to bed at 10 p.m. because I’m expecting to get up to start work at 6 a.m. But the lineups are wrong, because they don’t update them, either because they’re understaffed or don’t care. So I’ve gone to bed at 10 p.m. and I get a call at midnight saying I have to be at work at 2 a.m. The result is that I go to work without any rest.

The company claims that if something like that happens, you can book off sick and you won’t be punished. But that’s not true. They record every time you take off sick so they can use it against you later. They may use it to justify punishing you for something that’s totally

unrelated.

WSWS: What are some of the main issues that prompted over 96 percent of CP Rail workers to vote for a strike?

RW: The accuracy of train lineups provided by the company was an issue in the strike vote. It leads to us going to work unrested. Another is Canada’s transport regulations, which say you should only work for 12 hours each day. The union previously bargained this down to 10 hours. But crews typically go over the 10-hour threshold. This also came up at CN [Canadian National, Canada’s largest rail company]. We want the 10-hour rule to be respected. It’s not, and we don’t get compensated for working over the limit.

CP boasts about record profits every quarter. In 2012, when the company wasn’t doing so well, they imposed a cap on pensions for financial stability. Since then, things changed dramatically. The pension has such a large surplus that the company isn’t paying contributions into it at all. But they’re also refusing to remove the cap. Under the current pension, I won’t be able to retire comfortably. Inflation isn’t taken into account.

WSWS: How has the pandemic impacted your working conditions? Did CP take any measures to protect you against infection?

RW: The odd hours of the job mean we have to go to work in the middle of the night. Prior to the pandemic, it was difficult to get to work, but the pandemic conditions made it even harder. Places offering 24-hour services where you could buy food and other things are now closed overnight due to the pandemic.

The main threat is employee-to-employee transmission. If everyone’s properly masked, it can be seen as safe. If a train travels from Vancouver to Montreal, about 25 crews work on it. So your working environment goes through a lot of changes, and you need to clean your surroundings. Cleaning products were provided at the start of the pandemic, but this was more for show. As soon as it was clear that the pandemic was here to stay, the cleaning products disappeared. Nothing is provided to us to keep our space clean. If you want to get wipes or sanitizer, you need to pay for that yourself.

The way the company works, it doesn’t matter how much freight there is to move, whether the train is 3,000 feet or 12,000 feet long. We move all this extra tonnage and cargo, and that’s just to be expected of us.

WSWS: What role have the Teamsters played? What is your view of the union?

RW: There are outright blatant violations of our collective agreement on a daily basis. Even if we bargain and get an agreement, it’s not going to matter if CP doesn’t respect it. The union’s attitude

is, you'll just have to do as your told and we'll talk about the violations later.

I work by myself outside moving train cars around, and I'm supposed to get my lunch break at the fourth hour. But the company doesn't want me to take that. They say you have to keep working, and if I say I want my lunch break, they say, "are you refusing duty? We'll have to pull you out of service for an investigation." The grievance process is massively backlogged because of petty things like the company's constant violation of the agreement. The company is saying in talks that the arbitration system needs to change because it's not working. But that's due to the backlog they've created by constantly violating the agreement.

The union's stance is that even if the agreement is violated, you still need to do work. If an article in the agreement is violated, they say that doesn't give you grounds for refusing work on the spot. The only thing you can refuse on the spot is unsafe work. So I can't refuse work because I don't get my lunch break.

For me, the safety side comes into play during the summer. It's 40 degrees Celsius (104 degree Fahrenheit) outside and the track ballast radiates heat. It's very hot, I've been out there for four hours doing a physically active job switching cars, and I feel the onset of heat exhaustion. To me that's unsafe, but I can't take a break to cool down inside. The union's stance is always work now and grieve later, but nothing ever comes of it.

WSWS: Rail workers at BNSF in the United States are fighting against similarly brutal working conditions. They've established a rank-and-file committee to take forward their struggle independently. The BNSF Workers Rank-and-File Committee issued a statement declaring their solidarity with you at CP Rail and calling for an international struggle for improved wages and conditions. What do you think about this initiative?

RW: In the States with BNSF, the government mandates them back to work. Any time the union takes them to court, the company always wins.

The international strategy for railway workers is critical due to PSR [precision-scheduled railways], which has been implemented on all railroads across North America. The basic idea is that they expect the most amount of work with the least human resources possible. They're maximizing freight and profits, and cutting back on workers. It was PSR that caused the runaway train in 2019 in Field in British Columbia, where three workers died.

All railway workers have to deal with this. The main goal of PSR is to boost stock prices and share payouts.

The huge difference between railways and many other businesses is that they're in almost every neighbourhood. How safe do you feel sleeping in bed at night when hazardous goods and heavy freight is being transported through your backyard under such dangerous conditions?

It's good to see that the BNSF workers recognize the same issues as we do. It's great to have their support. We're all going through the same struggle.

It's unfortunate that a variation of the Hi Viz attendance policy has already been implemented at CP. It's good to see BNSF workers standing up.

The attendance policy was introduced at the end of 2017 or beginning of 2018. It's not the exact same system as at BNSF, but if you work 28 days straight, you get 1 day off. That day off can only be taken within a three-day period each month. If I work 28 days without booking off sick, I can have one day off between the 20th and 22nd of

the month. They don't have a points system yet, but they do have a matrix of factors that is not available for the employees to see, and they use that to decide whether to take you in for an investigation.

WSWS: CP's justification for the lockout is that we have high commodity prices due to the sanctions against Russia. The CEO said that "Canada's resources" are needed on the "world market" more than ever before, and by that they mean oil and other energy products, which are in high demand and can generate big profits due to the exclusion of Russian oil. The political establishment talks about us showing national unity and standing up for "democracy" against "Russian aggression," but here you're engaged in a struggle where workers' rights are being totally disregarded. What do you think about this?

RW: The company comes and locks us out, saying we can't afford disruption. But there's never a good time to go on strike. If it had been last year or the year before, they would have said, "the pandemic is not a good time." If it had been at the end of a wave of infections, they would have said, "the economy is recovering." So there's always going to be a corporate narrative.

But safety has to come first, and people need to look out for each other. The issue is, is someone going home safely to their family at night after work or is a billionaire profiting?

WSWS: What demands should rail workers fight for? What would workers actually need to ensure a safe working environment?

RW: There needs to be something to look forward to so that you can sustain yourself after retirement. This is a very physically demanding job and you spend a lot of time away from home, so you should be able to retire on a pension comfortably.

We need to be able to go to work rested. Nobody should have to think twice about getting behind the throttle of a train. Lack of rest shouldn't even be monitored as a metric for booking off work.

Employees need accurate resources, especially accurate train lineups, so they can determine when they go to work and avoid exhaustion.

And there's no better way to determine wage increases than to monitor how much the company is charging to move freight on their network. How much are they charging from one year to the next to move one ton of freight for a mile? A committee involving workers should monitor this and wages should be adjusted upwards accordingly.

WSWS: The WSWS calls for the founding of a rank-and-file committee at CP to take control of the struggle out of the union's hands, like BNSF workers have done. What are your views on this perspective?

RW: I think it's great what you guys put out there, the WSWS is the only way for workers to convey what they think and are fighting for.

Seventy-five percent of our dues go to the national union, and people are very dissatisfied with it. The BNSF committee is a great example to follow and an indication of what can happen here.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact