

“I couldn’t sleep for days”

CP Rail worker involved in accident denounces terrible working conditions

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Are you a CP Rail worker? Contact us to let us know what you think about the Teamsters’ decision to sell out your struggle by agreeing to binding arbitration.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has received a growing number of letters from CP Rail workers over the past week protesting the horrendous conditions of exploitation to which they are subjected by the combined efforts of a ruthless employer, the pro-corporate Teamsters union and the NDP-backed Liberal government.

In a wide-ranging interview, a conductor from British Columbia described his shocking experience following his involvement in a train derailment last year, and expressed his views on the current struggle for wage and pension improvements. The interview was conducted prior to Tuesday morning’s sabotage of the CP Rail struggle by the Teamsters, who agreed to binding arbitration and thereby robbed the workers of any legal rights to strike or take action to fight for their demands.

WSWS: Where are you based out of?

Conductor: I’ve been with CP Rail for four years and I’m based in BC. I used to work for government liquor distribution before a friend convinced me to apply to CP Rail.

WSWS: What does your job entail exactly?

C: I am a conductor, but when you are new and you do not have a lot of seniority, you are on a spare board. How it works for me is that I cover holes for when people call in sick or book time off. So, as spares, we do not work as much. Sometimes you can only work 12 hours. Sometimes you could be clear for the evening, but other times you are called in for midnight because someone called in sick. Sometimes, when it is really slow, you do not work for 4-5 days. When you do work you can only book 12 hours’ rest. You are allowed to book more than 12 hours’ rest but it is counted as a penalty if you are on the spare board.

The funny thing is that I can book zero rest on the spare board. Rests are voluntary. Some guys work all day and all night and book zero rest, and then go back out again with almost no gap between shifts. Even truckers are mandated to have a 10-hour gap between shifts. There are guys here that just do not sleep. I don’t know how they are able to do it. CP loves these guys because they will always make money for the company.

There is a lot the public does not know. It’s not just about money. CP is an evil corporation. They pay well, and there’s a pension, but they held back the pension cap from 2013. The old-school guys can retire with maybe \$80,000, but I can work the same amount of time

but will retire with \$60,000, a \$20,000 difference.

WSWS: What has your experience been at CP Rail? Can you describe your working conditions?

C: Because I am on the spare board, normally there are 15 of us. We cover yard shifts mainly. They start at different times. I have to cover days off and sick days for regular employees.

There have been times that I have worked nine hours straight without a break, no matter how cold or hot it is you have to work through it. When you do get a break, you get one 20-minute break a day. The supervisor often carries a stop-watch and he is timing you. Sometimes they come in at 15 minutes to let you know how much time you have left, which is a breach of our right to a 20-minute “uninterrupted” break.

There are no places in the yard to go to the bathroom, and they do not let you go to the other end of the yard. The bathroom break is incorporated into your 20-minute break.

We get watched on cameras while working, supposedly for our own “security.” We are watched like a hawk and listened to on our radios. There is always someone listening and watching. They do not give you the freedom to just work, they dictate everything you do. They are an evil corporation.

Our lineups are not right. The other night I was first out at 7:30 p.m. and the trains were delayed to 12:30 a.m., so that is five hours of just waiting for work. At 9:30 p.m. I booked in as unfit.

I know of a railway manager who was given just two days’ notice that he was moving to Sudbury. You do not have a life. For this reason, the company is geared towards hiring young single males who do not have a family or other commitments yet. A lot of workers quit after the first training day; we only keep about a third of the people we hire.

WSWS: I hear you were involved in a workplace accident. Can you tell me about that experience?

C: Last summer I was involved in a derailment. I was on the cars when six cars and one unit [engine] came off the track and crashed. And I jumped off. The whole thing happened so quick. Normally with an accident you are meant to be taken out of service and they do an investigation. But this was the summer and they had fewer crews. I called the superintendent and asked what was going to happen with me, and he would not take my texts, phone calls, emails. I could not sleep for days. I booked off sick. I was so stressed out. My life had flashed before my eyes. I tried to talk to a local boss, told him I am mentally unfit to run trains right now and no one is answering my calls or emails.

I needed a doctor's note because I was off for more than 72 hours. I explained I had not slept in four days, I am not mentally fit, and then CP told me I had to make a WCB (Workers Compensation Board) claim. But then CP fought my claim by telling WCB that my lack of sleep was due to the forest fires in BC and not due to the fact I was riding cars when they crashed! This went on for four months while my claim was in dispute. I was given no pay during this time. Not a single manager reached out to see if I was okay. CP made it worse and tried to bully me into quitting so they would not have to pay out my claim.

The psychologist deemed I had acute trauma stemming from work, so I got a cheque from CP through WCB. They made it really hard to come back to work. The town where I live has a doctor shortage, so when this all started, I told them I do not have a regular doctor. The four months I was off were terrible.

The guys that died in Field, BC got onto an unsafe train and CP covered that up because of money. [Three railroaders died in a train derailment near the community of Field along the British Columbia-Alberta border in February 2019.]

WSWS: Are you aware of any workplace safety violations?

C: Workers go over the 10-hour maximum shift length a lot. The company does not care. I have been on a train for 13 hours before. The calculation for pay is based on miles travelled and car length, not based on hours worked. After the 10 hours, you are paid a flat rate of \$80, no matter how many extra hours you have worked. I have heard of guys working an extra 6-7 hours because of delays and all the company has to pay them is an extra 80 bucks.

The "hot shot" trains [that haul consumer goods] are given priority, and so if you are on a coal or grain train that is much slower, you may have to wait for the hot shot to pass before continuing. So, you are sitting there for three hours while you wait for a more important train to pass.

WSWS: What are your thoughts about the CP Rail lockout/strike?

C: The strike is pretty crummy. CP does not want to give us anything we have asked for. For example, one of the things I wanted was secure vacation time. Currently, before our vacation kicks in at 10 p.m. on a Sunday, we can still get called in for a trip right up until 9:59 p.m. So, you could go 30 hours into your vacation time. But if you book in sick or unfit, it is on a computer showing you are on vacation. When you get back you can be suspended or penalized. CP said no to this demand.

The only way to secure the vacation time is by using "earned" days off. Every month you do not book time off due to sickness or vacation, you earn one day off. We are punished for time off and incentivized to work non-stop.

The current contract that was offered by CP Rail has no signing bonus, no change in the current pension cap scheme, just a two percent raise this year, and 2.5 percent the following year. CP had money to buy a new railroad but cannot pay into our pension or up our wages. They make record profits. Keith Creel, CEO of CP, was "railroader of the year" in 2021 and 2022, and he is a big reason why things are the way they are. He's a piece of trash!

WSWS: What do you think of the Teamsters union?

C: The Teamsters just passes the buck, too busy to help. My union grievances are just ignored and passed on to another disinterested bureaucrat.

I bought a house two years ago. My move-in date was on a Sunday and I had to be at the apartment for a walkthrough. So, I applied for a personal day to move but the response from management was no, not approved. I tried the union, and they told me to just call in sick and if I

get in trouble the union would use me as an example.

WSWS: Do you have any demands regarding your working conditions? What do you think workers actually need to work in a safe environment?

C: I think we should be able to take as much rest as we want without a penalty. Twelve hours is not a big gap between work shifts. There should be up to 24 hours' rest without penalty, and there should be more than one 20-minute break during a shift. We are called the "backbone of Canada" but our industry just makes up its own rules. We are the only industry that is not given time off to vote. We do not even have a legal right to vote, that is how messed up transport is.

I can guarantee Trudeau will force us back to work for the sake of the economy without even thinking about the workers' lives. He will force us back regardless of our strike demands.

About a year and a half ago, Transport Canada (TC) recommended new rest rules, more like those in trucking, with a 10-hour gap in between shifts. But CN and CP are fighting it and want zero rest. TC want us home two nights in a row once a week, but CN and CP are fighting this too. These rules were meant to be put in place last May but they were never implemented.

We are expected to jump on the train within 30 seconds to a minute. Something could be off by one number in the paperwork and if you do not catch it you could be fired. But its go go go, rush rush rush. It is dangerous but they do not care. You are just a number, you are expendable. They want to hold you ransom until you retire.

They seem to have it worse at BNSF. There, if you call in sick on a Friday, they ding you 25 points in order to scare employees off of taking any time off for any reason.

They move the stuff so quick now. I heard that a long time ago the training process was a much longer process. Now it is only three months. There is so much to learn, but they throw you out to the wolves. You could have zero experience and the next thing you know you are running a two-mile train full of jet fuel along a cliff and they do not care because you are just a number that is making them money.

After my initial training, I did not have a day of work for the next four months. When I was put on the schedule finally, my first job was as a foreman on a job. I had to tell people what to do even though I knew very little about the job myself!

I do not think the public knows about our working conditions. I think the public needs to know what is going on.



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