

Train derailment in California highlights dangers from relentless attack on railroad workers

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Are you a rail worker? Contact us and tell us about the working and safety conditions you face.

Early Monday morning a Union Pacific (UP) freight train derailed en route through Colton, California, sending 13 cars off the tracks. The locomotive initially caught fire, but the flames were quickly extinguished by Colton firefighters, according to a railroad spokesperson.

A contracted worker who was assisting in the cleanup process was injured and taken to a hospital. “They were trying to move that car over there, and they put the hook on a spot that wasn’t real strong on the car, so the tractor ripped it off and the chain hit him. So I’m pretty sure it broke his arm,” a witness told KABC News. No other injuries were reported.

Local media said the derailment occurred where tracks make a sharp turn to go under the busy I-10 Freeway as it heads north, while other tracks continue east.

The derailed freight cars were carrying lumber. If the derailment had involved toxic chemicals, it would have caused a massive catastrophe. Colton, located 55 miles west of Los Angeles, is a suburb of San Bernardino and part of a vast metropolitan area with a population of 4.2 million people.

The UP tracks run through a residential area, and several homes are located close to the tracks. None of the homes was reportedly affected, but UP officials acknowledged that an unknown amount of diesel fuel was spilled.

While the cause of the accident has not been determined and is still under investigation, the decayed state of railroad infrastructure, maintenance cutbacks and the relentless job slashing by the railroads have led

to regular accidents.

According to the National Transportation Safety Bureau, nearly every two hours, a person or vehicle is hit by a train in the US, and every year nearly 1,000 people are killed in train-related accidents. Almost every two weeks a train derailment leads to a chemical spill. The frequency of such events has been escalating over the last quarter century. During this period there have been a wave of mergers, acquisitions and restructuring schemes, led by billionaires like Warren Buffett who bought BNSF for \$44 billion in 2009.

Nicknamed “Hub City,” Colton is the site of Colton Crossing, which was one of the busiest “at grade” railroad crossings in the United States where tracks owned by different freight lines intersect on the same level, causing extreme backups. With rail traffic sharply rising due to the vast expansion of cargo coming and going through the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports, the primitive crossing was replaced with a “fly over” in 2013, which raised the east-to-west UP tracks over the north-to-south BNSF tracks.

This accident comes amidst a heated struggle between railroad workers and the multinational corporations they work for. Railway workers at Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF), Union Pacific (UP), Chessie Seaboard (CSX), Canadian Pacific (CP) and other companies are waging a struggle against unfair pay, draconian attendance policies and for improved safety conditions, including increased staff, adequate rest and shorter train lines.

The day after the Colton derailment, the Teamsters union shut down the struggle of 3,000 Canadian Pacific engineers, conductors and yard workers against hazardous working conditions, poverty-level pensions

and wage stagnation. Bowing to the demands of management and the Canadian government, the union ended the strike and agreed to submit contract issues to binding arbitration, essentially stripping workers of the right to strike, and allowing workers' terms of employment to be dictated by a government-appointed, pro-big business arbitrator.

In January, a US federal judge in Texas issued an injunction to block a strike by 17,000 BNSF workers against the implementation of a punitive attendance policy. The "Hi Viz" policy allots each worker 30 points and deducts points for every time that a worker takes off from work, regardless of the reason. To earn points back, workers must be on call 24 hours per day for at least two weeks straight. The policy is being used to discipline or fire workers who lose their points and to ensure that workers are available for duty virtually around the clock.

The Teamsters and other unions have enforced the judge's injunction, going so far as instructing BNSF workers not to make any public statements against the attendance policy.

Railway workers have repeatedly warned that labor shortages, exhausting work schedules and the lack on investment in necessary maintenance and upgrades pose enormous dangers to workers and the public.

In a recent interview with a conductor employed with CP Rail, the rail worker outlined these dangers. Citing CP's harsh attendance policy, which mimics the Hi-Viz attendance policy, he said, "I might go to bed at 10:00 p.m. because I'm expecting to get up to start work at 6:00 a.m. But the lineups [schedules] are wrong because they don't update them, either because they're understaffed or don't care. So, I've gone to bed at 10:00 p.m., and I get a call at midnight saying I have to be at work at 2:00 a.m. The result is that I go to work without any rest," the CP rail worker stated.

"We need to be able to go to work rested. Nobody should have to think twice about getting behind the throttle of a train," he stressed. "Employees need accurate resources, especially accurate train lineups, so they can determine when they go to work and avoid exhaustion."

Another CP rail worker stationed south of the border in Iowa testified to the increasingly dangerous working conditions placed upon workers for the sake of making a few extra dollars for the rich oligarchs who rule over

this industry. "We've had multiple guys with 10 to 22 years' seniority quit. You can't replace that kind of experience with a person off the street. The training of new employees is suspect at best."

The worker pointed to the much-hated Precision Scheduled Railroading (PSR) system, which has been implemented throughout North America since 2017. The PSR system has increased train car lines (a dangerous increase in the number of freight cars), reduced routine maintenance and imposed mass layoffs even as traffic volume has increased over the years.

"PSR is another huge problem," the rail worker in Iowa stated. "We don't have the infrastructure to run these monster trains. Train makeup has basically been thrown out the window. It's all about building these monsters in blocks now to eliminate as much switching as possible. Constant run ins and run outs that you have no control over."

The railroad companies want to make more with less and expect rail workers to work like cattle with no consideration for their safety and then threaten to fire them if they protest or object. They cut maintenance workers, repair people, engineers, yard masters and other essential workers necessary for the safe operation of these rail companies. Any serious accidents are routinely blamed on "human error," sacrificing safety for corporate profit.

Having been abandoned by the pro-company unions, railroad workers are increasingly seeking a way to organize opposition over these life-and-death matters. We urge UP, CP and other rail workers to follow the lead of the BNSF workers by building rank-and-file committees, independent of the Teamsters and other unions, to mobilize a fightback against the attack on jobs and working conditions.

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