

Canada's Transport Safety Board presents damning report on 2019 CP Rail train derailment

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CP Rail workers have established the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee to fight for workplace safety and put an end to the brutal conditions of exploitation that are responsible for fatal accidents like the Field derailment. Email cpworkersrfc@gmail.com to join.

The final report into the deadly derailment of CP Rail Train 301 near Field, British Columbia, on February 4, 2019, was presented by the Transportation Safety Board of Canada (TSB) Thursday. The findings document a litany of profit-driven decisions and failures to respond to warnings that lead to only one possible conclusion: CP Rail bears responsibility for the deaths of conductor Dylan Paradis, engineer Andrew Dockrell and conductor trainee Daniel Waldenberger-Bulmer.

The report, over three years in the making and grossly overdue because of the efforts of CP to sabotage the investigation, attempted to explain to the victims' families, workers and the public what exactly happened that day. It also provided recommendations to Transport Canada aimed at "making cold weather train operation safer through mountainous rail territory."

The derailment

Dan Holbrook, Manager of the TSB Head Office and Western Rail Operations, gave a detailed accounting of the events leading up to the accident.

Train 301 set off from Calgary at around 2:30 p.m. on February 3, 2019. Its route was along CP Rail's main western line to Vancouver, which involves "traversing mountains characterized by steep grades and sharp curves," Holbrook said. "Before leaving Calgary the train underwent and passed the required air brake test. The train was operating in extreme cold temperatures below 25 Celsius."

"At around 9:30 p.m., the train started the 13.5-mile descent down Field Hill," he continued. "When the entire train entered onto the steepest part of the grade it was not able to hold its speed at or below the 15 mph speed limit. When the speed reached 21 mph, the crew applied the brakes in emergency as required by railway operating procedures."

"The train came to a stop at Partridge at around 9:50 p.m. with about 9 miles of mountain grade remaining before Field. After the train was brought to a stop, the decision was made to set the brake cylinder pressure retaining valves on 84 of the 112 cars, rather than retaining valves and handbrakes. This would facilitate getting the train underway by releasing the brakes and allowing the train's air brake system to recharge as the train continued its descent, an operation called release and catch."

The crew had reached the end of their shift, so a relief crew, consisting of Paradis, Dockrell and Waldenberger-Bulmer, was called in. "By the time they arrived at Yoho, the closest road access point to the train, at around 10:45 p.m., the temperature was 28 Celsius," Holbrook confirmed.

An on-track vehicle transported the crew to the train. However, Holbrook explained that "delays, including a frozen track switch, meant that they didn't arrive at the train until 12:20 a.m. All the while, the trains airbrake system had been leaking brake cylinder pressure, reducing its capacity to keep the train stopped on the grade."

Holbrook then detailed how the derailment occurred: "The relief crew took over and were preparing to resume the trip when the train began to creep forward at around 12:42 a.m. The train gradually accelerated uncontrolled down the steep mountain grade reaching 53 mph, a speed well in excess of the maximum authorized speed for this section of track."

"At this speed, the train was not able to negotiate the sharp 9.8-degree curve immediately before the Kicking Horse River bridge. Two locomotives and 99 cars derailed and the 3 relief crew members were fatally injured."

Corporate negligence and non-existent regulation

The events leading up to the Field derailment provide a devastating indictment of what is known in the industry as precision-scheduled railroading (PSR). Summing up this corporate policy, which has been adopted at railroads across North America, a CP Rail worker said of PSR in a recent interview with the WSWS, "The basic idea is that they expect the most amount of work with the least human resources possible."

The Field Hill is one of the most dangerous sections of track in Canada. Numerous derailments have occurred there. In March 2021, an intermodal car from a CP freight train derailed in Field. In January that same year, a grain train derailed 6.5 kilometers to the west of Field, temporarily knocking out power to the town. There were no injuries reported on both occasions.

As a result of the danger posed by the steep stretch of track, CP Rail previously operated a rule that no train should be permitted to descend Field Hill when the temperature dropped below 25 degrees Celsius. This policy was due to the well-known fact that brakes prove less effective in extremely cold weather. In response to a reporter's question at Thursday's press conference, the TSB confirmed that CP Rail abandoned this policy after the 2015-16 season, with no explanation provided as to why.

The board found that common problems like failing brakes in cold temperatures had become “normalized” by CP Rail and that many reports were filed by crews on the dangers of mountain terrain year after year, yet “no risk assessment was conducted and insufficient corrective action was taken.”

Shockingly, investigators also revealed that the day before his death, Dockrell descended the same section of track on a grain train in similarly cold temperatures and was forced to use the maximum braking power available. He had filled out a safety hazard report about the dangerous stretch of railway but was unable to submit it electronically due to a power outage at the bunkhouse. A paper copy was recovered at the crash site.

The investigation determined that earlier in Train 301’s trip from Calgary, and just prior to the emergency stop at Partridge Station, an increased demand for air from the locomotives had been observed after the brakes were applied. Although this observation was discussed during a job briefing after the emergency stop at Partridge, it was not recognized as problematic at the time.

One of the key reasons for this decision was the inadequate experience of the train master, whose “training and experience did not adequately prepare him to evaluate the circumstances or for the decisions he was tasked with making,” the TSB found.

Many mainstream media reports leapt on this finding to portray the unidentified train master, rather than CP Rail, as the problem. But as a former CP Rail worker explained to the *World Socialist Web Site*, the company knowingly places poorly trained people in these office positions.

“Very junior employees fresh out of conductor training are put into these office jobs instead of guys that have been out there for 40 years and who have seen it all,” he said. “They have done it all, they have seen bizarre stuff. But these green employees have no real-world experience. Then they are put in management positions and cannot even put on a handbrake. It is so frustrating. But if you came back with a different approach, they would overrule you 99 percent of the time. So instead of listening to an engineer or conductor with 30 years’ experience, you have to listen to a guy with just one year under his belt. Those guys in Field were in a lose-lose situation.”

The worker added, “I will give credit to the crew in that subdivision. They knew what to do. If something was not right they would have brought it up to management. But lots of times you are just told, ‘Bring the train down the hill, we need to get that train out. We don’t want to hear your excuses.’”

TSB chair Kathy Fox noted that automatic braking technology is inexpensive and has been around for a decade, but has not been widely “embraced” by the railroad companies. She argued for their use as an “alternative” to hand brakes that would improve safety as well as “take a lot less time to apply.” No requirement for this most basic of safety measures has been introduced by the Liberal government led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

The board outlined three recommendations to Transport Canada: enhanced test standards and time-based maintenance for brake cylinders on freight cars operating on steep descending grades in cold ambient temperatures; the installation of automatic parking brakes on freight cars, prioritizing those used in bulk-commodity unit trains on mountain grade territory; and, for CP Rail to demonstrate to Transport Canada that it can effectively identify hazards and assess and mitigate risks using all available information.

These recommendations are yet another empty gesture by a toothless watchdog to enable the continued profiteering of the self-regulating railroads. As was quickly pointed out by Fox early on in the press conference, “The TSB does not enforce, assign fault or determine criminal or civil liability.” The recommendations themselves are non-binding, since it is up to Transport Canada, a federal government department, to introduce rules for railway operators.

Even so, CP Rail responded furiously to the recommendations. Its official statement denounced the TSB’s findings variously as “extremely disappointing,” “inappropriate” and “misrepresented.”

The general response to TSB recommendations is silence. Braking issues have been on the board’s radar for decades. By her own admission, Fox stated that “unplanned and uncontrolled movements have been a concern for many years,” and that 189 such events were reported to the TSB between 2010 and 2019.

In 2013, a parked train carrying scores of oil tankers began to move on its own and derailed in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, killing 47 people and incinerating the town’s central core. It was only then that the “brakes issue” was added to the TSB watch list.

Yet even this tragedy failed to rouse Transport Canada into action. It took the deaths of another three railroaders in the Field derailment before the federal government adopted a rule change requiring the use of handbrakes on mountain slopes, which was promptly appealed by CP Rail.

Rail workers must take up a struggle for workplace safety and an end to corporate profiteering

The brutal working conditions on the railways, plucked straight from the 19th century, are an extreme form of the general decades-long deterioration of worker protections and living standards that has led giant corporations like CP, facilitated by governments and their union lackeys in Canada and the United States, to reap record profits during the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

As a statement from Paradis’s family sent to the *World Socialist Web Site* responding to the TSB report put it, “We’ve lost confidence in the ability of government to hold corporations responsible for negligence. Profits continue to soar at the expense of the working class. The policy is ‘Uphill slow. Downhill fast. Profits first, safety last.’ They say the rules are written in blood, and unfortunately, until our government takes measurable, concrete steps to ensure safe operations and hold corporations accountable, this practice will continue. Precision-scheduled railroading should be outlawed.”

The results of the Field derailment investigation underscore the urgency of the struggle being waged by the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Ending the domination of private profit on the railways, which subordinates everything—including workers’ lives—to the accumulation of vast wealth, requires a worker-led rebellion against the life-threatening working conditions presided over by corporate management, the federal government and trade unions.

The Committee declared in its founding statement, “Let us organize a common struggle against the rampant profiteering and corporate-union-imposed dictatorship that currently dominates North America’s railroads! If [CP Rail CEO Keith] Creel and his corporate buddies plan on building a multi-national railway to ship cargo and exploit workers from the Canadian Arctic to tropical Mexico, then we will build a multi-national worker-led counter-offensive of Canadian, American, and Mexican railroaders to stop corporate profiteering at the expense of our health, safety, and very lives.”

All rail workers wishing to join this fight should contact the Committee at cpworkersrfc@gmail.com.



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