

Teamsters to do nothing after inquiry documents Canadian Pacific's responsibility for fatal Field, B.C., derailment

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Do you work at CP Rail or another operator? Contact the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee at cpworkersrffc@gmail.com to tell us what you think of the Teamsters' response to the Field derailment report.

The Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) issued a perfunctory statement following the release last week of the federal Transportation Safety Board's (TSB) final report into the derailment of CP Rail Train 301 in February 2019 near Field, British Columbia. The derailment, which occurred when air brakes failed on a steep gradient during extremely cold weather, claimed the lives of three railroaders.

The TSB report gave a detailed accounting of the events leading up to the Field derailment. It provided a devastating indictment of what is known in the industry as precision-scheduled railroading (PSR). As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in an initial article on the report, "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 found that CP Rail repeatedly ignored warnings from workers about brake issues during cold weather. The day before his death, Dockrell himself completed a report raising this issue after travelling down the same stretch of track near Field. Due to a power outage at the CP Rail bunkhouse, he was never able to file his report. After the derailment, it was found on his dead body.

The TSB report also revealed that brake problems on Train 301 were reported earlier in its journey, that the train master had received inadequate training from CP Rail to do his job, and that the company abandoned a safety rule that prohibited trains from descending Field Hill when the temperature dropped below -25 degrees Celsius in 2015 without explanation.

The TSB, whose government remit does not allow it to lay legal blame in accidents, issued three non-binding recommendations: "(E)nhanced 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."

The statement from the TCRC, which claims to represent 16,000 rail workers, was a miserable display of its subservience to CP Rail's corporate dictates and the pro-business regulatory system presided over by the federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau.

After briefly pointing to some of the TSB's main findings, the key passage of the TCRC's statement noted, "We trust that the TSB recommendations will be adopted in order to mitigate the chances of such disaster occurring again."

The TSB's recommendations carry no legal weight, since it is up to Transport Canada, a federal government department that has proven time and again its servile devotion to corporate profiteering at the expense of worker safety, to translate them into enforceable rules for the rail operators. The TCRC is thus declaring its full "trust" in the big business Liberal government, which took no action despite a long list of warnings about train braking issues on steep grades prior to the deadly Field derailment. The TSB admitted last week that it recorded 189 "unplanned and uncontrolled movements" between 2010 and 2019.

Transport Canada has provided the most minimal oversight of the country's railways—and usually as a form of PR damage-control in the aftermath of fatal accidents such as the Field derailment.

When Transport Minister Marc Garneau ordered railways to immediately use handbrakes on all trains stopped on mountain slopes following the Field tragedy, CP Rail appealed it immediately. Even when recommendations have been adopted by Transport Canada and put into effect, they are routinely flouted by CP, which faces, at most, a nominal fine. CP Rail left a mountain train parked without crew or handbrakes last year above the same site as the fatal Field derailment just two years prior.

In its angry response to last week's TSB report, CP Rail made clear that it will use all means at its disposal to resist and undermine any new regulations. The company denounced the TSB report as "extremely disappointing" and "inappropriate."

By contrast, the Teamsters' statement makes clear it intends to do precisely nothing to defend rail workers. As far as the union is concerned, the TSB report marks the conclusion of any dispute over who was responsible for the Field derailment.

The TCRC commended the TSB in its statement for identifying

“all the issues and shortfalls,” and expressed “satisfaction” with the TSB’s “thorough review of the background, circumstances and causes of this tragedy.”

The TCRC evidently felt that it would be impolite towards its corporate and government “partners” to recall that the TSB worked assiduously throughout to protect CP Rail from criminal investigations over the derailment. In January 2020, when lead TSB investigator Don Crawford proposed that the RCMP take over the inquiry with a view to pressing criminal charges, he was promptly removed by the Board’s leadership. Facing the threat of a lawsuit by CP Rail, TSB chair Kathy Fox issued a grovelling apology to the rail operator.

Having painted the pro-corporate government regulatory system in rosy colours, the union proceeded to issue a hollow and entirely insincere declaration of sympathy to the relatives and colleagues of the three deceased rail workers. The TCRC wrote that the derailment has “drastically changed the lives of the families, friends and co-workers along with our organization forever.”

While the derailment certainly devastated the lives of the families and friends of the three workers, it led to no substantive “change” let alone a “drastic” one in the close collaboration between Teamster bureaucrats, CP Rail executives and government regulators in presiding over an unsafe work and disciplinary regime akin to a dictatorship. Workers’ concerns continue to be summarily dismissed, with threats and intimidations, including firings for petty disciplinary infractions, on the order of the day. Workers’ complaints are funnelled through a massively backlogged company-union “work now, grieve later” arbitration system, known by workers as a “kangaroo court” stacked in favour of CP Rail. As one rail worker told the WSWs, “I’ve never heard of a guy coming out winning.”

Moreover, the TCRC did not bother to lift a finger for the families of the victims, who spoke of a radio silence from the unions during their harrowing years-long battle to uncover the truth about the accident. As Pam Fraser, Dylan Paradis’ mother, recently told the WSWs, “We thought that the Teamsters would be a supportive partner in our initiatives to effect change but they went by the wayside.”

The TCRC statement called the fatal derailment “needless and preventable.” Yet at every opportunity, the union has sabotaged every action workers take to oppose unsafe working conditions and prevent accidents like the Field derailment from being repeated. Over the years, the union has done nothing to oppose CP’s slave-labour scheduling regime, and punitive demerit system and drug-testing policy that batters workers into dangerous conditions in the first place.

Last month, when CP locked out 3,000 conductors, engineers and yard workers who voted overwhelmingly to strike, the Teamsters conspired with CP to rush them back to work. The union agreed to send the dispute to a pro-corporate arbitration procedure that precludes mention of many of the key demands raised by the workers. The Teamsters’ agreement to arbitration robs the workers of their right to strike, perform work-to-rule, and collectively bargain for years to come. Rail workers will not even have the chance to vote on the arbitrator’s dictated settlement.

Such processes are business as usual for the TCRC functionaries,

who have relied on the federal government to intervene into the last eight out of nine labour disputes to impose directives scripted by the executives at CP Rail.

The TCRC, like its union counterparts everywhere, is nothing more than a labour police force that has long been integrated into the structure of corporate management and the capitalist state. The callous indifference displayed by the TCRC to the victims of the Field derailment and the threats rail workers face on a daily basis are not the product of ill will on the part of TCRC bureaucrats. Rather they are rooted in the union’s loyalty to the capitalist state and subservience to the imperative of private profit accumulation by ruthless corporations who see workers’ lives as entirely dispensable.

The TSB’s damning report into the Field derailment and the TCRC’s pathetic response underscore once again the urgency of rail workers taking up an independent struggle for workplace safety and improved conditions. Workers at CP Rail have established the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee to conduct this fight.

The CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee is fighting to put an end to the corporate domination of North America’s railroads by organizing a worker-led rebellion against the life-threatening conditions overseen by the tripartite alliance of corporate executives, union bureaucrats, and government regulators. As the Committee stressed in its founding statement, “The struggle at CP Rail is a key battleground for workers across Canada, the United States and internationally. As the ruling elites prepare to plunge the world into a catastrophic war potentially fought with nuclear weapons, they cannot tolerate any dissent by workers at home. The arbitration deal that CP, the Teamsters and Trudeau government are trying to impose on us will rob us of any right to strike, perform work-to-rule or bargain for improvements for years to come. If they succeed, similar draconian methods will be employed against working people everywhere.”

We encourage all rail workers who wish to join this struggle to email cpworkersrffc@gmail.com.



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