# CP Rail worker on how the company disregards safety and fires workers who raise concerns

**Penny Smith**
**15 April 2022**

*This interview is part of the* World Socialist Web Site's *effort to support the building of the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which was established last month by rail workers in Canada to fight for their demands after their latest strike was sold out by the Teamsters union.*

*Write to cpworkersrfc@gmail.com or contact the WSWS to help build the committee and share your experiences.*

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with a former engineer at CP Rail about the company's disregard for workplace safety and attempts to silence concerns raised by workers through the use of its draconian disciplinary regime.

The worker told us that, when he hired on at CP Rail out of high school, he worked first as a conductor for three years before taking a six-month training course to qualify as a locomotive engineer.

CP Rail conductors rely on spare boards that are supposed to inform them on train schedules, so they know when they have to start work. Improved scheduling is a major demand for rail workers in their ongoing struggle due to the company's refusal to provide accurate train lineups.

The worker told us, "I was set up as a conductor in a pool where I had to watch two spare boards, so I was constantly looking at the lineups. They were completely off 90 percent of the time. It's like they're throwing darts at a board. You do not know if an engineer will book sick before he's about to get called and you get the call when you are supposed to be getting your rest. Or, right before bed, the phone rings and you are expected to be there in two hours to run a train not fully rested."

If workers are called in for a shift without rest, the worker explained that they have little option but to go. "There's the fear of punishment if you do not take the call," he said. "With the demerit system at CP, they can give you demerits for not tying up your boots or not having your vest done up. It is outrageous in the sense that there is no wiggle room. And sometimes, there is no warning. It could be your first offence and you are booked in for a statement. The statement is sent to LR [Labour Relations] who review the case and come back with a decision. We call it a kangaroo court because there is no chance of winning, no matter what argument the union presents. I've never heard of a guy coming out winning.

"Say you book off sick in that two-hour period before starting a shift, it is a guaranteed statement and 25 demerits. And the points are not even standard, just arbitrary. What they do is load you up with 55 demerits, so you are on edge and at risk of losing your job. After 55, they can use any excuse — performance, safety, or attendance — to dismiss you.

"If you are booking sick between Wednesday and Sunday, that is like working on the weekend. So now a target is on your back. If you have two absences in a 6 month or 12 month period it is considered a pattern, so guys come in sick, tired, and stressed out with personal issues because they do not have the option of calling in off."

Fatigue among engineers and conductors is a chronic problem, creating the conditions where tragic accidents can occur. "An engineer could be on the unit of the engine a mile behind the conductor performing switching duties," commented the worker. "Sometimes he is making huge moves, and relying on radio contact, so he cannot visually see what the conductor is doing on the ground, and he is relying on him to make decisions. But if he lines the wrong switch, it costs the company $300 to fix it. And if he had 55 demerits already, he is probably going to get fired.

"Even if you are just a member of the crew when something goes wrong, it does not matter if you were remotely responsible, you are slapped with a demerit or a random drug test. We jokingly call it 'the family plan.' Human error happens every day. Maybe there is just a lapse of judgment or maybe the conductor was not rested, but the reprisals just snowball from bad to worse."

Our interview took place as the report into the Field derailment in 2019 by the Transportation Safety Board of Canada (TSB) was being released. The derailment, which occurred due to a brake failure on a steep grade during extremely cold temperatures, claimed the lives of three rail workers. One of the TSB's main findings was that CP Rail failed to give the trainmaster on duty the night of the derailment appropriate training to fulfill his role.

"The trainmaster gives you instruction as to which cars and where to pickup," the worker explained. "Some are qualified engineers, but some are just office people that are not part of the actual operation of the train. They sit in the office building with trains on a computer screen, and then they give you a list of cars to pick up.

"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 who've seen and done it all, and they've seen some bizarre stuff. But these green employees have no real-world experience, and they are put into management positions when they cannot even put on a handbrake. It is so frustrating. But if you came back with a different approach, with a different argument, they overrule you 99 percent of the time. It was a foregone conclusion that they were right. 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."

Turning to the Field derailment, the worker continued, "The trainmaster would have had to talk to the division manager or operations manager, potentially employees with little to no experience with trains. These positions have so many different names, the titles are constantly changing. I dealt with a lot of position names and titles that were essentially the same job. And their experience never changed. They were usually junior employees, non-union, they were on salary and got scheduled days off. They are headhunters. They are there to be the company's eyes. The company rat.

"An operation manager would have been running that subdivision. The

© World Socialist Web Site

rail traffic controller (RTC) would get instructions from the operations manager. The RTC gets on the radio, they instruct the staging of the train. Sometimes they get the superintendent involved. Even if you knew in your heart that this is not the right decision, that it is crazy, if you go against them you are called in for a statement because it went against their authority. Those guys in Field were in a lose-lose situation.

"I ran 20,000-ton coal trains 32 miles from Sparwood, BC [a mountain route similar to Field], on a heavy grade. If your brakes were not at 100 percent, there is a chance of a runaway. You had to be on your game. It was very unnerving. You are kind a hoping and praying that everything is going to work out right.

"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 they just say, 'Bring that train down the hill, we have to get that train out. We do not want to hear your excuses'."

Braking problems have been rife throughout the rail industry over recent years, with the TSB acknowledging that 189 "unexpected movements" were reported to it between 2010 and 2019. The worker told us he believes this to be the product of poor maintenance motivated by management's efforts to cut corners.

"Management would cut down the units that have dynamic braking, which helps your stopping factor," he said. "They would limit the full factor because you are short of units. Sometimes you are short one on the head end, so you do not have that full capacity. The dynamic braking does not stop the train, the air brakes do that, but it helps train handling and makes the train less susceptible to derailment. Or sometimes you still have the dynamic braking power, but the unit is not functioning at 100 percent. That happens more often than people would like to know.

"There are a certain number of cars that do not need to have air brakes and they push that ratio to the limit. As far as the actual cars, the braking capacity would not be near as acceptable."

This dangerous safety environment is maintained by CP Rail through a dictatorial workplace regime and the threat of dismissal for anyone who speaks up. The worker explained to us how his own dismissal occurred over a safety concern.

"I had a few demerits from absenteeism," he said. "I had about 35-40 demerits. I was an engineer on a coal train weighing about 20,000 tons and I was doing a live change-off. The conductor was younger, and he looked like he had just seen a ghost. I asked him what was wrong, and he said that his manager-engineer, a guy out of the office, was going to be running this 20,000-ton coal train, for the first time ever. Managers get qualified to run trains through the approximately 6-week-long manager training program done through a simulator out of the office in Calgary, Alberta.

"The mixing of crews, where a manager and a unionized employee are working together as part of a train crew, is a huge issue, and I was upset. A manager can throw you under the bus in a second, so there is zero trust, especially since the manager is an office guy who has never been on the ground. So, it is a very uncomfortable situation for the unionized guys.

"After talking with this conductor, I got frustrated and angry and I confronted the manager who was in the station with the trainmaster. He was cocky with me. I asked him about his qualifications and if he had ever run a 20,000-tonne coal train.

"'Nope,' he said, 'this is my first trip.' I told him what I thought about managers running trains, that he should not be out here, and that the conductor is scared senseless. I also told him what I thought of the management training program and that I had been through six months of training where I had to perform many training trips and evaluations. I asked him who would be riding with him, and he said it was just him and the conductor.

"I was not reported on by the manager trainee but by the trainmaster who was in the area who overheard me. She turned me in for bad mouthing the manager and I was dismissed for harassment and 'conduct unbecoming.' The next morning, I was called in for statements about the incident along with my union rep.

"The next thing I knew I was being fired for sticking up for my fellow employee, the junior conductor who was not comfortable speaking up for fear of reprisal. I thought it was my responsibility as a senior employee to stick up for the junior employee. But with my accumulation of demerits, I had a target on my back, and I was in their crosshairs. All that they needed was a final nail in the coffin. This incident put me over the threshold of 55 demerits, which gave them grounds for my dismissal.

"Maybe the conversation did get a little heated, but I did not verbally insult or swear up and down at the manager trainee. I was literally just asking him questions about how he felt about the position he had put this conductor in and the position the company has put them both in.

"You need experience to know what the engineer is doing beside you. For the first couple years you are just going for a ride. There is such a huge scope of what you need to know before you feel comfortable on the train. Until you actually get behind the throttle and feel 152 cars push you ahead on a hill, there is no theory or anything that you can read or talk about that is close to the experience of running an engine.

"The conductor of the train was called in for statements and he had my back 100 percent. He said in his statement that I was looking out for his best interest."

The worker noted that CP Rail justifies putting poorly trained managers on a train crew with a conductor by citing "efficiency." If no engineers are available, they would rather send a manager than wait 30 minutes for the on-call engineer to arrive. "If they push back, because they're non-union, they do not even get a statement," the worker added. "They are just fired.

"They talk about efficiency, but these managers would not do track speed ever. They creep around at 15 miles an hour in these subdivisions because they do not know what they are doing. It is hard on equipment, and your ETA is way off. They do not know the track profile, but there are lots of spots where you have to know the lay of the land. All of us knew how long it took from one station to the next, and you would be waiting and waiting and waiting for this guy. He would be creeping by at 5 to 10 miles an hour, so the crew waiting is going over their hours and now they are under pressure to get the train out. But you could not say anything about it over the radio.

"Back in the day, every manager was required to run a train. Even the 50-year-old secretary had to know how to run the train or be part of the train crew. They would do their day jobs and be on call for the rest of the night. And there was a form of respect between the managers and the running train employees. Then it just snowballed into just hatred and disrespect. And no trust.

"The conductors are always on edge for fear of making a mistake. We call it the 'pucker effect.' Just so Creel can get his crazysalaryandbonuses. Amounts that are unheard of. And now to lockout employees over a couple percent raise? The crews deserve better."

The worker concluded, "It's productivity first. Safety is lower on the totem pole than making money.

"Do not take any shortcuts, they say. But cutting training from six months to six weeks is a massive shortcut. You can preach this stuff all you want about safety and employee mental health, and it is all just fluff, the bottom line is they need that train from A to B as fast as they can.

"One of the hardest subdivisions in Canada is Revelstoke to Field, yet it is one of the most junior territories in Canada. Man, it is a tough subdivision. Crazy grades and snow. The older guys get out of them as quickly as they can. CP does not even try and recruit senior engineers to the worst subdivisions, they send the more junior employees to those territories.

"So, you gotta learn fast. There is no wiggle room or time to get

© World Socialist Web Site

adjusted. You gotta just do it. Kudos to those guys because they do an excellent job for what they are given.

“But anything can happen. As an engineer, I did not visually inspect every car. You trust the employee in their position, and if, because of cost cutting and taking shortcuts, they did not do their job — then you gotta go with that. But when there is a mistake, CP is out hunting for a scapegoat.

“I’ve heard from managers more than once that safety is the cost of doing business. But is someone’s life really the cost of doing business? Equipment can be replaced, but lives cannot.”

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**


© World Socialist Web Site