

Organize a fight against one-man crews and Hi Viz! Build rank-and-file committees at all Class I railroads!

World Socialist Web Site Logistics Workers Newsletter
14 May 2022

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges railroaders across North America to organize themselves to fight against the threatened implementation of one-man crews. Railroaders should establish a network of rank-and-file committees, building upon the establishment earlier this year of committees at BNSF and Canadian Pacific, to unite workers at all seven Class I railroads in the US, Canada and Mexico.

In public remarks last week, BNSF CEO Katie Farmer declared that the company was using “aggressive measures,” including a possible move to single person crews, to deal with labor shortages and service issues that are plaguing the industry. This followed similar statements by railroad executives last month at a federal hearing on the freight rail industry.

These problems, to a large extent, are self-inflicted, the result of the profit-driven frenzy to squeeze every last cent out of the railroads. Even as reliability has plummeted, BNSF reported an operating income last year of \$8.8 billion, a 13.7 percent increase from the previous year. BNSF also saw their revenue increase to \$22.5 billion, 11.6 percent more than last year’s total. The real reason the railroads are in shambles is because they are controlled by giant hedge funds and super-rich individuals like Warren Buffett and Bill Gates who view them not as critical components of public infrastructure but as personal piggy banks.

To the extent that they have any solution to the crisis facing the railroads, it is by exploiting the workforce past the limits of human endurance. Things were bad enough before. Now, after the institution of the Hi Viz attendance policy, which destroys any possibility of engineers and conductors having a family or personal life outside of work, hundreds have left the profession. It was likely this was the plan all along—to trigger a worsening manpower

crisis through the policy in order to justify a push for single-man crews, which the railroads have been demanding for years.

Hi Viz, “super pools,” which send crews down routes where they have little experience, and lax safety measures during the Covid pandemic have created conditions in the railroads that are dangerous both for workers and for the public at large. Right now around the country, crews are running trains exhausted and stressed out, creating conditions for mistakes and deadly accidents. One-man crews, under which only one single overworked engineer rides trains that are 8,000 feet long or more, will lead to tragic and preventable deaths.

The railroads have the full backing of the courts, the Biden administration, Congress and both big business parties. The upholding of Hi Viz by a federal judge this year, who also banned workers from striking against it or engaging in “self help,” recalls the hated “government by injunction” of more than a hundred years ago, when the federal and state governments routinely used the courts, backed by the police and National Guard, to ban strikes. Now, Hi Viz is stuck in arbitration, where it will stay tied up potentially for years until a federal mediator inevitably issues a ruling favorable to the company.

Among railroaders, frustration and anger is building over the refusal of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) and International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers-Transportation Division (SMART-TD) unions to organize a serious fight. They insist that workers have no choice but to meekly allow the playing out of the legal framework set forth by the Railway Labor Act.

This slave charter law is explicitly designed to all but ban strikes, depriving workers of the most elemental means to fight attacks on them by management. But the

RLA also integrates the rail unions as a component part of a state-sanctioned system of labor discipline, in which they along with management, the courts, and the White House come together against railroaders. In return, the union bureaucracy receives all sorts of institutional guarantees, allowing it to draw their six figure salaries from workers' dues money unmolested. Whenever rank-and-file opposition emerges, the unions point to the RLA as a justification for why workers can't do anything.

But conditions have gotten so bad that many engineers now feel they have nothing to lose. Indeed, workers have never won anything in history without a fight. But to win a fight against a company backed by the government and the unions themselves, workers need their own organizations to assert their own interests and leverage their own power.

This means the building up of a network of rank-and-file committees, consisting of and democratically controlled by workers themselves. Committees have already been founded at BNSF and Canadian Pacific, but this network must be expanded to embrace representatives from all Class I railroads across North America.

These committees will allow railroaders to concentrate their efforts along three main fronts:

First, railroaders should demand that they have the exclusive right to decide what their strategy to fight Hi Viz and one-person crews will be. For months, as the courts ruled repeatedly and predictably against workers on Hi Viz, BLET and SMART-TD sent empty reassurances that all was unfolding according to an alleged plan which workers had never seen, much less accepted. Railroaders cannot allow this fight to be subordinated to and smothered by the union-management-government partnership established under the RLA. To place trust in the courts and the arbitration process is to guarantee in advance that management will get everything that they want. This will not only end with working conditions becoming worse, it will lead to the destruction of the railroads by private profit.

The interests of railroaders themselves, not the unions' relations with management and the Democratic Party, must take unconditional priority. To ensure that this is the case, railroaders, facilitated by the rank-and-file committees, must vote and approve their own strategy, and demand the right to countermand actions by the union officialdom which violates this.

Second, railroaders should wage a fight against the oppressive labor laws which reduce them to industrial slavery. Is it any wonder that conditions have gotten so

bad if workers are prohibited by law from striking while management is allowed to violate with impunity the terms of the contract?

The Railway Labor Act, as well as all other similar legislation infringing on the constitutionally protected right to strike, must finally and immediately be repealed. This is not a question of a letter-writing campaign to Congress, much less electing Democrats as the unions would have workers believe. The fact that the RLA has stood for a hundred years is testament to the fact that both parties and the entire political system is controlled by and defends the corporate oligarchy, not workers. If there is to be a change, workers must organize their own power as broadly as possible to *force* a change.

Third, railroaders must turn out to the broadest sections of the working class for support, above all among workers in other branches of the freight industry. There will be many opportunities over the summer for railroaders to build a united struggle with other workers across the country. In California alone, hundreds of thousands have their contracts expire this summer, including more than 20,000 dockworkers. Freight shipped to the United States via western ports such as Los Angeles accounts for a huge proportion of the freight which travels on BNSF trains.

Dockworkers face the same issues as railroad workers; last fall, the Biden administration brokered an agreement between the port operators and the unions to run the docks 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Oil workers, warehouse workers and manufacturing workers are others whose industries rely upon the flow of deliveries via the railroads.

The *World Socialist Web Site* stands ready to assist workers in building rank-and-file committees. To contact us to get started, fill out the form below, or visit wsws.org/workers. These committees should adopt a joint strategy and plan for common action, and appeal to workers across North America for the broadest possible support.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact