

Iowa BNSF rail workers speak out on impact of Hi Viz policy: “It’s like your kids don’t know who you are, your dog doesn’t recognize you”

Marcus Day
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Anger continues to build among BNSF rail workers over the punitive “Hi Viz” attendance policy and the reactionary federal court injunction, issued at the company’s behest, which blocked a strike by 17,000 engineers and conductors.

On May 15, the Lee County chapter of the AFL-CIO trade union federation held an “informational rally” in Fort Madison, Iowa, ostensibly to draw attention to the impact of Hi Viz on BNSF workers.

In an indication of workers’ deep estrangement from the unions, however, only 20–25 attended the rally, despite Fort Madison having a BNSF terminal that employs several hundred.

The union bureaucrats who spoke at the event combined demagogic bluster of “firing Warren Buffett and Katie Farmer [BNSF’s CEO]” with attempts to channel workers’ opposition behind fruitless appeals to Democratic Party politicians, such as Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg. The big business Democratic Party, however, is spearheading the efforts to impose “labor discipline” on workers at the railroads, ports and other supply chain hubs in the name of “national unity,” as the Biden administration recklessly accelerates the war drive against Russia.

Other union officials, meanwhile, attempted to cover up and deny the irreconcilable conflict between the interests of workers and BNSF’s super-rich corporate owners. Jesse Case, secretary treasurer of Teamsters Local 238, addressed himself to the financial elite, saying, “You can make your billions while we take care of our families, you can make your billions and still be greedy, and give us a day off.”

In reality, the immense fortunes controlled by figures such as Warren Buffett, whose Berkshire Hathaway owns BNSF, are derived from the intense and growing exploitation of railroaders and other workers. With the railroads owned and controlled by corporate oligarchs such as Buffett and Bill Gates, every decision impacting rail workers’

lives—including adequate time off, wages and safety—is subordinated to the private profit interests of the ruling class, which are proving themselves ever more incompatible with the basic needs of the working class.

“They work him to death”

Among the workers who attended the rally, those who spoke with WSWs reporters described at length the grueling impact of the Hi Viz attendance policy and worsening working conditions. Expressing a determination to fight, workers placed no confidence in federal arbitration as a means to resolve issues in their favor, despite the efforts of the SMART and BLET unions to promote illusions in it. (The names of those who were interviewed have been changed to protect them against victimization under the terms of the draconian court order.)

Donna, the wife of a veteran rail worker, told the WSWs, “Lately, this whole Hi Viz thing? This has been huge to him. It has stressed him to the max. He can’t be off. I mean, they work him to death, okay? He just takes one train right after another. He just keeps going and going and going.

“And if he takes time off, it costs him points. You have to work 14 days to get more points back. And you can never go over 30. Well, now supposedly, they are changing the Hi Viz, and they’re offering them the opportunity to get bonus points if they stay marked up. But they still will never go over 37 points. They can get that extra seven, I think.

“But if he doesn’t get the points back, then he runs out of points. If he runs out of points, he could lose his job. And, you know, if we have things going on as a family, it doesn’t matter. Depending on the day of the week, or what the

situation is, that will determine how many points it will cost you. And so, it could cost us seven points to be off on, say, Super Bowl Sunday, right. I mean, some of it's just crazy.

"I'm not so much worried for us because our kids are grown up. But any of these young people, if you had kids, they're doing ballgames, they're doing graduation. But when you work for the railroad, you don't have a life, you don't go to bed."

Asked about the federal court injunction which blocked a strike by BNSF workers, she responded angrily, "I think it's BS. Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. You tell me another organization, another factory and another employer that can go and get a judgment that says you can't strike? They just took away their rights, their ability to do something about what's going on with their life. I mean, things like that have happened before. I don't know, back when Obama was in, they went on strike. It doesn't last long. And they ordered them back to work."

"It's been two-and-a-half years since my husband had a raise. And they're coming back to the table, and they're bringing insane junk! They want to raise their insurance from \$200 a month to \$800 a month. And they seem to be just okay with it. Because they're getting away with it, you guys. The trains are still moving."

"They say they made \$6 billion. Yeah. And every time it's record-breaking profit. And my husband says, 'Who the hell do they think is out there doing it?'"

"I think the goal here is they want their employees to quit. I think they're all about the one-man train. Now they're telling people, 'Oh, we've only lost 300 people.' It's actually a lot of the younger ones. They're saying, 'You know what? I'll just get another job.' And a lot of them are. But my husband, he's feeling trapped, because he's so close to retirement."

"I think they want people to quit. I think they they're trying to do it with the conductor especially, not so much the engineer right now. And then they'll go to this one-man train, and they won't have to worry about what are they going to do with all these excess employees."

"It's hard enough with two of them on there to keep each other awake. And that's not the only thing. They're running a 16,000-foot train. My husband says, 'I don't got a clue what's going on back there at 16,000 feet.'"

"He'll say, 'Okay, so I'm out and I'm in the middle of Missouri, and there isn't a town around.' And all of a sudden he gets a signal saying there's a break back there, something's stuck. So he has to stop the train, and the conductor has to get off and walk back there in the dark. And he says, 'How am I going to do that by myself?' He could be there for hours. Yeah, I mean, there's just crazy stuff."

Chris, a long-time BNSF worker, said angrily about the injunction, "Give me back the right to f——g strike. One narrow-minded person can take it away from us?"

Asked about the arbitrator, he replied, "Oh, BNSF will buy them off."

"I'm an engineer. That 16,000-foot train is just ridiculous. When I hired out, 5,000 feet was a long train. And I've just seen them grow."

Workers needed to counter the company's offensive with one of their own, he said. "It's time. It's more than time for the working people to take it back."

Tim, a veteran rail worker, said about the exhausting work schedules, "It's hard to explain to anyone. Everyone thinks of work as 9–5, you know, or eight-hour shifts. And it's just not like that. You know, the work is 24/7 on-call, and it's hard for people to get back to your router. That's the hardest thing is trying to explain 24/7. It's probably 40 hours on a round trip, you know, and then you'll make another one. We get activated all hours. And now, all the quality time you should be spending at home you're spending at a hotel."

"With Hi Viz, in order to earn your points back, you know, you got to work 14 straight days. Well, they'll hold FMLA [time off protected by the Family Medical Leave Act] against you. Like, if you work seven days, and you have to take FMLA for your child and take him to the doctor, now you have to start your 14 days over. But FMLA is not supposed to have any impact on that. It's not right."

"Or if you take a vacation day, a personal day, that starts your 14-day cycle over, even though that's time off that you that you've earned. But they hold it against you for taking it off. It's just a no-win situation."

"I feel sorry for those young guys with kids, they're quitting left and right. Just last week, from last Thursday to this morning, 50 people quit, got dismissed, or were on furlough and didn't come back. Fifty people, in two days."

"You'll go through a period where you're making great trips, and then all of the sudden you hit a brick wall and every trip is just a slog. It's like your kids don't know who you are, your dog doesn't recognize you."

The World Socialist Web Site urges workers to share their story and to build the BNSF Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which has formulated a list of demands and guiding principles to carry out a struggle against Hi Viz and other attacks. To join the committee, email bnsfwrfc@gmail.com.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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