

Two derailments within five days underscore dangerous conditions on Canada's railways

Steve Hill
27 May 2022

Are you a rail worker at CP or CN? Contact the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee at cpworkersrffc@gmail.com to take up the struggle against dangerous working conditions and share your experiences.

* * *

Two train derailments in Canada within the past week have underscored once again the criminal disregard shown by the major rail operators for the safety of workers and the general public.

A 57-year-old man was killed Thursday near the hamlet of Edgeley, Saskatchewan, around 50 kilometres northeast of Regina when the maintenance vehicle he was driving collided with a Canadian National (CN) Rail train, causing a derailment.

The derailment is being investigated by the company's own CN Police. A CN spokesman stated that 18 rail cars left the track, causing a spillage of an unknown substance. A separate release earlier Thursday from the RCMP indicated that the train may have been carrying fuel.

The deadly accident came just five days after a CP Rail train derailed near Fort Macleod, Alberta. Forty-three cars of the westbound train, heavily loaded with potash fertilizer, were left crumpled like tin cans along a stretch of track just metres from a highway.

Demand for Canadian potash from buyers around world has risen significantly since the beginning of the year due to the disruption caused by the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and far-reaching sanctions on the Russian economy. Canada is the world's largest source of potash, accounting for nearly 32 percent of production in 2020, followed by Russia at 20 percent.

Police said there were no injuries and no concerns to public safety, in spite of the close proximity to road traffic. As usual, CP Rail merely stated that the cause of the derailment was under investigation, but refused to provide further details.

Derailments in Canada occur so frequently that very few actually make the news. Those that do rarely rate more than a brief mention. Rail cars can weigh 100 tons or more, and

they often carry extremely hazardous freight. An accident at any speed carries enormous potential for mayhem.

In the last six months, these are just a selection of the derailments that have occurred:

- On December 6, 2021, a CP Rail freight train including residue cars that last contained liquid sulphur, propane and anhydrous ammonia derailed in southeastern Alberta. The freight train derailed about half a kilometre north of Ensign, a hamlet in Vulcan County situated about 80 kilometres south of Calgary. Of the 39 cars that derailed, 14 were residue tank cars—cars containing a residue of previous contents that were empty at the time of the derailment—with eight last containing liquid sulphur, three last containing propane and three last containing anhydrous ammonia.

- On December 28, 2021, just south of Craven, Saskatchewan, 26 cars of a CP Rail train carrying potash derailed blocking a local highway.

- At least a dozen CP Rail cars carrying corn derailed near Drinkwater, Saskatchewan on March 12, 2022.

- On March 20, at least two CN Rail cars containing solid sulphur derailed in North Vancouver, BC. Preliminary information indicated there was a leak contained to CN's property but there were no fires or injuries.

- A train carrying intermodal containers in the CP Rail yard in the heart of Winnipeg derailed on May 15. A company spokesperson claimed there were no dangerous goods involved.

- On April 29, the residents of Field, BC, were forced to rely on back-up power when a CP Rail freight train derailed four cars in Yoho National Park, taking out the feed to the community.

The community of Field has seen multiple train derailments in recent years. In January 2021, a train carrying grain derailed about 6.5 kilometres west of Field and also temporarily knocked out power to the town. In March 2021, another train derailed in the town.

The regularity of these potentially life-threatening derailments underscores the fact that the railroad operators view them as a normal part of their standard operating

procedure, which is known as precision-scheduled railroading. The goal of PSR is to cut costs in all areas to maximize profits for big shareholders.

The most notorious derailment associated with Field was that of CP Rail Train 301 in February 2019, which claimed the lives of conductor Dylan Paradis, engineer Andrew Dockrell and conductor trainee Daniel Waldenberger-Bulmer. The train was operating in extreme cold temperatures below ?25 Celsius. As a result of the danger posed by a 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. CP Rail abandoned this policy after the 2015-16 season, with no explanation provided as to why.

In the relentless pursuit of profits, the crew was ordered to operate in unsafe conditions. The result was tragic.

The Transportation Safety Board of Canada, a toothless agency which has no regulatory or enforcement powers, released a damning report on the February 2019 Field derailment which the company continues to dispute. The Teamsters Canada Rail Conference, the corporate lackeys who represent 16,000 rail workers, had little to say except that they were convinced that the recommendations from the TSB report would be implemented.

A 2021 independent audit report for the Auditor General of Canada documented a total of 1,245 rail accidents in Canada in 2019, 694 of them derailments, which is almost two a day. The audit focused on whether Transport Canada implemented selected recommendations from a 2013 audit regarding the department's oversight of the safe transportation of people and goods on federally regulated tracks. Transport Canada was unable to show whether departmental oversight activities had contributed to improved rail safety. In addition, the department did not assess the effectiveness of the railways' safety management systems—despite the many reports over the previous 14 years recommending that Transport Canada audit and assess those systems.

It was found that Transport Canada did not measure the overall effectiveness of its rail safety oversight. It failed to identify whether rail safety has improved as a result of its inspections and audits of safety management systems.

It is hardly surprising that Transport Canada is so lax in its oversight duties. The two largest rail operators, CN Rail and CP Rail, each have their own police forces and conduct their own investigations. The conflict of interest is glaring but fully accepted by a political system devoted to the accumulation of private profit. Together, CN and CP represent more than 95 percent of Canada's annual rail tonne-

kilometres, more than 75 percent of the industry's tracks, and three-quarters of overall tonnage carried by the rail sector. The duopoly is almost a law unto itself. With the spike in commodity prices, particularly grain and potash, due to the US-NATO proxy war against Russia, the pressure to move as much freight as quickly as possible is only going to increase.

A CP Rail worker recently explained in a letter to the *World Socialist Web Site* that the undermining of workplace safety and protections for workers has developed over decades. “Canadian Railway labour relations and public safety have been on a rapid descent,” he wrote. “While there was an ongoing struggle in years predating the Federal Deregulation of Railways Act of 1992, once this Act was in place the decline accelerated at a blistering pace. This process was condoned by all levels of government, which are, in the experienced view of long-tenured rail workers, acting in concert with Transport Canada and the Transportation Safety Board. They are collectively complicit in an arms-length do nothing approach.”

The ongoing series of derailments is not merely the responsibility of the rail operators, but also the Teamsters union, which has done everything to suppress rail workers' struggles for improved workplace safety. In March, the Teamsters refused to act on an overwhelming strike vote at CP Rail, handing the company the initiative to lock out 3,000 engineers, yard workers and conductors. After responding to the lockout by calling a token strike, the Teamsters promptly called it off and sent all outstanding issues in dispute to binding arbitration, a process rigged in favour of the employer that robs workers of any right to vote on their future employment terms.

In response to the Teamsters' sabotage of the strike, workers at CP Rail formed the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee to unify rail workers across North America in a joint struggle to put an end to the corporate domination of the railroads, and secure decent-paying jobs and safe working conditions. We strongly encourage all rail workers to contact the committee at cpworkersrfc@gmail.com and participate in this crucial fight.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)