

“Hell on Earth!”—US railroad workers speak out against intolerable working conditions

Our reporters
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The World Socialist Web Site has received a large volume of comments from railroad workers across the United States in recent days. Railroaders voted by 99.5 percent for strike action this month, after working nearly three years without a contract under intolerable working conditions. But the rail unions, instead of organizing a strike, are calling for Biden to appoint a Presidential Emergency Board, which would be tasked with imposing a government settlement, blocking a strike.

The WSWS publishes some railroaders' comments below to bring the conditions in the industry to the attention to our world audience. More comments will be published in the coming days.

If you are a railroader, we want to hear from you! What are your experiences like on the railroad? What do you think needs to change? What do you think about the conduct of the unions and the Presidential Emergency Board? Contact us by filling out the form at the end of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

“There is no way to be properly rested for this job”

A railroader from West Texas: “Hell on Earth! Just imagine living the rest of your working life without ever knowing when you are going to go to work, when you are going to get off work, when you will eat, sleep, get a day off, or have any semblance of a schedule or a normal life.

“Before the carrier instituted Precision Schedule Railroading (PSR), the job and schedule was difficult enough. With the advent of PSR, the carriers cut workers, cut opportunities for time off, increased our workloads and time spent away from home and on trains, tripled the length of trains, and told us to just lump it or leave. Our quality of life plunged into the toilet. The lineups that told us when we were scheduled to go to work became worthless. The only thing one could count on was if he/she had met the federal rest requirements, he/she was going to work.

“I was forced to take stimulants to stay awake and sleeping pills to sleep, then more stimulants to wake up from the pills I took to go to sleep. It got to where I couldn't sleep at all, then I would fall asleep for way too long and couldn't wake up. I literally felt like I was going crazy. About a year ago I developed an eye problem because of staring at computer screens all night with no sleep. The doctor said my entire body was full of inflammation from my lifestyle. I hope I never have to go back to that hell hole. I gave that company two decades. I

don't think they could pay me enough to go back unless circumstances change drastically.”

Central Virginia: “I work for Norfolk Southern. We have a ‘long pool’ in which the conductors get no set days off. They leave their home terminal and can spend up to 36 hours or more in a hotel, waiting for their next train. Often that will be their off day; in a hotel waiting on their train back home.

“When they get back home to their home terminal, they're often back to work after their 10-hour mandatory rest period, depending on how quick the pool is turning. That is no quality of life. There is no meaningful rest or time at home. They literally live by the phone, waiting on the next call. That is the same for conductors and engineers working from the extraboards.

“Another issue, our personal leave days are rarely approved. We can put them in months in advance for a doctor's appointment or anything at all, and they will wait until the last minute to deny the time off. That forces many to mark off sick, which can cause extraboard workers to forfeit their entire guarantee pay, all over one sick mark off. It can also lead them into the ‘attendance program,’ a 5-step disciplinary program for ‘excessive absence.’ I put that in quotations because there is no rhyme or reason to it; there is no definition of what is excessive absence. You can have a 98 percent attendance rate and still end up in the program.

“The company cut our ranks to the bone, either through furloughs or forcing employees out the door because of the lack of time off and the expectations they have on us. They expected us all to pick up the slack before and through the pandemic, while they were raking in record profits year after year, laughing all the way to the bank.

“We all suffer from a lack of sleep. There is no way to be properly rested for this job and still be able to take care of matters in our personal lives. What would make things better, in my opinion, is for them to provide a better wage that takes into account the current rate of inflation and one that shares the record profits these greedy SOBs made off of our backs. A better work/life balance would be [where] we all have guaranteed rest days, even on the pool runs where conductors have none.

“Right now, only extraboard workers and engineers on the pool run here have rest days, and often we will have to work into our scheduled rest days, again causing us to miss appointments for ourselves, time with family, etc. A guaranteed rest day means if your day off falls on any given day, then that day is guaranteed for you. Call windows need to be established around rest days to limit the time an employee can be called before they enter their 48-hour undisturbed rest. In general, call windows would be very helpful. You could have X amount of employees available from say, 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., then the next

group is available 7:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. This would give employees more time at home to rest and be with their families.

“Those are just a few ideas off the top of my head that would make things better for us. But I’m not going to hold my breath. Railroads could change all of this if they wanted to, but they won’t. It hurts their bottom line, and we all know those corporate suits can’t have that.

“I also have very little confidence in our unions, who BARELY represent us as is, to come through with a favorable contract for us. When the dust settles, it is my cynical view that the railroads will have most of what they want with all of the concessions coming from the labor side.”

Maintenance workers: “We work anywhere between 70 and 130 hours per week”

Upstate New York: “The carriers have been playing games with railroaders for a long time now. We work extremely short-handed on the track department and get constantly run in the ground by management. The carriers continue to rake in record profits every quarter but will not come to the table with a reasonable contract that rewards the employees for their hard work and dedication, as well as working through a pandemic that saw the railroads making hand over fist profits.

“All you have to do is listen to one of their earnings calls while the big wigs pat themselves on the back while the real workers on the ground get abused. We are all tired of it, and if we have to go on strike to prove a point, we are ready willing and able to do so. The carriers see this as a joke, coming to the table offering 0 percent raises and wanting concessions in health care that would cause us all to lose money. I mean, in reality, those of us who have to travel 700-800, even 1,000 miles from home every week are already losing money with inflation and the carriers’ piss poor away-from-home expenses.

“The railroad used to be the job everyone wanted. Now the carriers can’t hire anyone because everyone realizes what a shithole these places are now. Time for a change!”

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: “I’m on a production railgrinder. We work anywhere between 70-130 hours per week with the moving we do to stay with the machine. Some days we only get 2-3 hours sleep. How safe is that? Yet they say, ‘we believe in safety, and we care for our employees.’ They deemed us essential yet deny, deny and deny.”

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: “It isn’t much better in the crafts either. PSR has eliminated the proper tools and equipment, because they felt that our Boom Truck ‘wasn’t being utilized to its potential, therefore it isn’t needed any longer’ until some drunk plows through a crossing, knocking down a Gate Structure and Signal Bungalow. Then you have one, maybe two Signal Maintainers attempting to put the crossing back together, while a manager attempts to get something to try and lift the heavy equipment. No more properly equipped or staffed Maintenance Gangs. Some guys have had their test load increased so much, that it is impossible to get enough Permitted Track Time to finish these tests on time. Overtime has been restricted so much that some trouble calls are held until normal business hours, instead of being fixed as soon as the issue was reported.”

North Dakota: “We have been told numerous times that we will learn to do more with less. Seems to be the motto for our upper management. Instead of 20-25 guys on a particular line of track for

maintenance, we have to figure out how to do the same amount of work with 5-10 guys. We need significant raises and better working conditions.”

“To give up family time, it’s no longer worth it”

Kansas City, Missouri: “Three weeks ago, after 23 years on the railroad as a locomotive machinist, I finally got a position on first shift with Saturdays and Sundays off! I could finally watch my grandson play t-ball! I missed so much of my daughter’s life because I had to work!

“The quality of life for railroaders is so terrible. We pay nearly 5 percent more in taxes to finance our retirement. There are no shift differentials for working weekends or late shifts. No sick pay, no matching 401K. Now there’s no job security. We are nothing more than an employee ID number to our bosses at headquarters. For what we sacrifice, we sincerely deserve the compensation we are requesting. The railroads are posting record profits but refuse to reward their workers for their efforts.”

East Tennessee: “I’m a new [worker] to the railroad, somewhat, having 4 years at CSX. I came here looking for things like above-average pay and great benefits that I’d grown up hearing about. But once I got here, I quickly learned those days were long gone. Several employees with 10 years of experience or more have quit since I’ve been here and took jobs closer to home. They have very near the same pay when you take out all the expenses related to traveling, and some even have better benefits now. They are overjoyed with the family time they get now.

“So all this to say the railroad has lost all its appeal. To give up family time, it’s just no longer worth it. It could once be justified to give up family time for the better life you could provide your family, but I know countless railroaders living paycheck to paycheck and behind on bills. I’m also one of the several people I know actively looking elsewhere. There are a crapload of job opportunities where one can be home with family and still make good pay, a lot of which are unionized. They have unions that are not under federal laws that forbid them from using their powers to get a fair wage. We pay union dues to a union that is powerless under federal law, so we sit as beggars, like non-unionized workers, hoping we get something for our efforts instead of being able to strike like a union and demand we get what we deserve.”



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