

El Paso train conductor killed in preventable accident

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A railroad worker was killed in El Paso, Texas, on Monday night when two train cars were derailed, striking and killing the conductor, 49-year-old Mario Aurelio Navarro. According to Union Pacific, the owner of the railroad, the derailed cars also damaged a safety guard and ruptured a natural gas line. About 50 residents were evacuated from their homes near the Alfalfa Rail Yard where the death occurred.

Navarro leaves behind a wife and two children. Co-workers have launched a GoFundMe page to assist the family.

The engineer was cleared to proceed with a maneuver called “shoving,” in which a cut of cars or a train is pushed from the rear. This is usually done under impaired visibility, especially at night. A derailment device was installed on the track earlier in the day and never removed, according to an initial investigation by the El Paso Police Department, which led to the derailment.

Train operations are extremely dangerous, compounded by a lack of safety equipment, always-on scheduling, severe fatigue, reduced crew sizes and mass resignations.

Railroaders familiar with these operations took to social media to decry the carriers’ failure to implement simple precautions, like lighting and warning systems.

“When the BNSF conductor was killed last year riding a shove, BNSF management went around doing damage control. We all told them the main issue we had watching our shoves was piss poor lighting at night.” The worker said management contended it was *less* safe to light the yards. “That was management’s mental gymnastics to [avoid] actually having to spend money to do what was right. So, before we judge the dead, just remember all the managers who have ignored safety issues, or pressured you into unsafe situations.”

Another recounted a failed attempt to alert managers about a malfunctioning safety device:

“We have an automatic switch system on our hump and the sensor for the switch clearance shows clear when trains are still foul. So obviously that ended up causing an accident. They asked us what can be done and we said move the detector back 50 feet. They said no because it’s too difficult to add any length of wire to the existing system. We just stared in disbelief.”

One worker responded to this preventable accident by identifying what drives the carriers’ policies: profit. “Shove lights! The fact they’re not in every major switch yard is simply greed. They’d have to maintain them and actually take liability for when something happens. But you know if they could get rid of a job, they’d install them in every track on the system.”

The railroads employ 116,000 US workers, down nearly 30 percent over five years. The causes of the mass exodus include severe overwork, “precision scheduling” (PRS) and “Hi-Viz” attendance policies that keep workers on-call on short notice with limited or no days off. Railroaders have been working with no contract for years under conditions where wages are stagnant, there has been a lack of safety and COVID-19 protections and facing consistent pressure by management to reduce crew sizes.

While rail workers are being squeezed for every waking minute of their labor time, the railways are enjoying record profits. Billionaire Warren Buffett in his annual letter to shareholders described his ownership of BNSF, the largest US rail carrier, as his next “most valued asset” after his core insurance business. The railroads are the most profitable industry in the country. One corporate executive claimed “capital investment and risk are the reasons for their profits, not any contributions from labor,” a claim

which stirred up a storm of rebukes from workers.

Nevertheless, the rail carriers are in a precarious situation. The railways are of strategic importance not only to the functioning of the economy, at a time when supply chains are convulsed and inflation soaring, but to Biden's war drive against Russia and China. Even small interruptions to logistical flows can send ripples through the economy before the midterm elections this fall or impede arms production and shipment.

Rather than leverage the strategic position of rail workers to demand and win secure railroad operations, well-paying jobs and adequate time off, the unions have blocked all efforts of workers to organize, stringing them out for three years without a contract, a wage increase or "pandemic pay."

Instead, the major rail unions lobbied the Biden administration to use the anti-worker Railway Labor Act (RLA) to impose government intervention—the Presidential Emergency Board (PEB)—thus blocking strike actions with mandatory "cool down" periods.

The PEB published its conclusions last week and, as expected, sided with the carriers on every substantive point—salary "increases" far below inflation, removal of the cap on employees' health care contributions, a continuation of PRS and "Hi-Viz" scheduling, failure to address short-staffing and safety concerns and a "me-too" clause that will pit workers against each other.

One union, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, in a letter to members took pride in its leadership through a "long, tough process" in utilizing "every step of the Railway Labor act" to drive negotiations behind closed doors. In the wake of the PEB findings the IAM quickly cut a sellout deal with the carriers that will be used to set a pattern for the other railroad crafts.

Railroad workers are confronted with two choices: abandon the railroad industry or organize with workers across unions, carriers, and national borders to end the race to the bottom. This requires a break with the pro-corporate unions and the formation of rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, where workers will not be intimidated or silenced. This week the newly founded Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee took an important step, issuing a call for a national rail strike to end decades of sacrifice. Workers seeking to more information on rank-and-file committees should contact

the WSWS.



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