

Six train derailments in 36 hours as conductors and engineers begin vote on sellout contract

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20 October 2022

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Six trains derailed over a 36-hour period across the United States on Tuesday and Wednesday this week. The string of derailments took place as engineers and conductors began voting on a White House-brokered contract, which falls far below their demands, particularly on quality of life and working conditions.

In Tacoma, Washington, a train derailed after a temporary switch malfunctioned. The passenger train was going only 10 mph during a 5:00 a.m. round trip into the station without passengers when the switch failed, causing the train to derail. No one was hurt, and the switch was repaired later that morning.

Another incident in Eugene, Oregon, saw four cars partially derail, precariously leaning off the track as crews worked to right the cars. The train was out of the way of ongoing traffic but could have been hit by other vehicles if the derailment had occurred at the nearby intersection.

Other incidents occurred in Bossier, Louisiana; Gibson County, Indiana; and near Houston, Texas. No one was injured, and no hazardous material was spilled in any of the incidents, but a hazmat team was deployed to the six-car Houston derailment as a precaution.

An accident in Orneville, Maine, was particularly dangerous, with multiple cars piling up on the track. A rail punctured the cabin but did not harm anyone. Local news reports indicate that the derailment occurred because of a washout of the track around 3:15 a.m. on Wednesday and that a car carrying asphalt was leaking into a nearby bog. The train, operated by Canadian Pacific, was severely damaged, and heavy machinery will need to be

brought in to lift the cars and engine.

These derailments show the dangers which rail workers face on the job each day. One derailment in Missouri this summer killed four and injured another 150 after an Amtrak train hit a dump truck.

According to the Federal Railroad Administration, there were 8,076 train accidents last year, injuring 4,622 people and killing 753. Of those, railroad workers made up 2,568 injuries and 11 deaths. This is equivalent to 2 percent of the 120,000 workers on the seven Class I railroads, an injury rate higher than in mining and oil extraction, construction and manufacturing based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Injury and accident occurrences have fallen over time, particularly during the pandemic, but fatalities have increased over the past decade, rising from 603 in 2010 to 753 last year. The rise in fatalities is the result of the pressure on railroaders to work more hours moving more freight on longer trains, overaging and poorly maintained tracks. Workers are kept on 24/7 call and are worked to the bone as the carriers continue to erode working conditions and cut jobs.

The United States has substantially higher accident and injury rates than other countries. Data from the European Union shows that there were just over 1,500 rail accidents in the entire EU in 2019. That year 687 people were killed and 568 seriously injured. This is all the more striking given the much higher density of rail networks in Europe and the larger share of people who travel by rail.

The accident rate in the US is similar to India, which had 28,000 rail accidents in 2019. While much larger in absolute terms, India has a population four times that of the US. India has a per capita rail accident rate almost identical to the United States.

This dismal safety record for American rail carriers has

corresponded with an ever increasing profit margin for the companies. The railroad industry operates on a whopping 50 percent profit margin, the highest of any industry in the country and 10 times the national average.

Also this week, Union Pacific announced that its quarterly earnings are up 18 percent to \$2 billion, a \$300 million increase over last year's third quarter earnings. The earnings report notes that the company spent \$2.1 billion to repurchase 9.5 million shares of its own stock just last quarter. In total, Union Pacific has spent \$6.5 billion on stock buybacks so far this year.

Meanwhile, the carriers are claiming that they do not have enough money to pay workers adequately and properly staff their crews. Workers continue to labor understaffed, on-call and overworked so that companies like Union Pacific can spend billions enriching their investors.

But in spite of record profits, railroaders are being made to vote on contracts containing wage increases below the rate of inflation. More significantly, issues critical for safety and well-being have not been addressed. Engineers and conductors are continuously on call and frequently made to operate trains with little sleep. They currently have no guaranteed sick days, and the new contract would give them only three unpaid days off per year to schedule doctors' appointments. Meanwhile, trains are continuously getting longer, with three-mile-long trains now not uncommon. This creates a dangerous situation for both rail crews and communities in which the railroads operate.

The union bureaucracy is determined to ram through these contracts in spite of overwhelming opposition, defying votes of 99 percent or more to authorize strike action. Workers, however, are organizing independently through the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee in order to defeat the contract and prepare the ground for a national strike.



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