

Union Pacific maintenance worker dies in explosion near Houston as BMWED keeps workers on the job after contract rejection

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A maintenance of way worker for Union Pacific (UP) died in an explosion Saturday morning while working on tracks north of Houston, Texas, local press reported. Authorities are still investigating the accident, but initial reports suggest that fuel gas was ignited while the worker was operating a welding torch.

Following Saturday's accident, UP management sent out a predictable press release expressing regret. "Our thoughts are with the employee's family and coworkers," the statement solemnly declared.

But whatever the immediate circumstances, UP and the other railroads have created conditions in which dangerous accidents occur on a daily basis on the railroads. In this, they are abetted by the union bureaucracy, which has ignored overwhelming votes to strike and is attempting to ram through contracts that keep these dangerous working conditions in place.

The tragedy takes place amid voting for engineers and conductors on a White House-brokered deal that falls far short of workers' demands. However, the unions are attempting to ram through the deal by leveraging the threat of congressional injunction. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) and Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation, Transportation Division (SMART-TD) unions have maintained a guilty silence since Labor Secretary Marty Walsh urged Congress to pass anti-strike legislation in the event that engineers and conductors reject the contract. Walsh himself was an invited speaker at the

BLET convention last month, as was House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who had already drafted legislation to impose a deal.

Similar contracts were "passed" at other unions over the past two months in voting marred by serious irregularities, including in the IBEW where many workers reported never receiving ballots.

The Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees Division (BMWED), meanwhile, is keeping its members on the job after they voted down their contract last month, under the terms of a secret agreement with rail negotiators to automatically extend the "status quo" should workers vote down the tentative agreement.

Following another contract rejection by rail signalmen, the Brotherhood of Railway Signalmen is also keeping workers on the job using the same tactic. The International Association of Machinists, after extending its strike deadline into early December, claimed the contract which workers earlier rejected was narrowly ratified in a revote held last week.

In response to Saturday's death, the BMWED sent out a short statement of "condolences." While the accident is still under investigation, the BMWED statement implied that the worker was at fault by adding, "We urge you to always take additional time to review safety precautions in every aspect of the job. For welders, please check the storage of your oxyfuel cutting systems and inspect them for leaks and proper ventilation. Also ensure that the arresting check valves on both ends are in working order and that flashback arrestors have been installed."

While BMWED essentially let UP off the hook in this antiseptic statement, they responded far more

aggressively to workers pressing for strike action. BMWED President Tony Cardwell issued an open letter last month attacking “fringe groups”—by which he clearly meant the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee—advocating strike action, and declared that the union would not support or defend any “unsanctioned” strike.

“We talked about [the accident] this morning,” a Baltimore-area maintenance worker said. “Apparently propane gas built up inside the cabinet on the truck. There must’ve been a leak. The truck was parked near the track. One of the workers was using a rail saw or grinder, which threw sparks towards the truck. It ignited the gas in the cabinet and exploded.

“These workers are under immense pressure to perform under limited track time,” he added. “Regardless of what the circumstances were that contributed to the explosion, the company will blame the worker.”

The worker, who has not yet been identified, is the fourth at UP to die this year, and the second in Texas. On September 1, a conductor died in a train derailment near El Paso, which also ruptured a gas line and required the evacuation of nearby residents. Only seven days later, two crew members died in a collision in Mecca, California.

In February, a BNSF yard worker died after being struck by a train at a yard in Denver, Colorado. In June, four died and 150 were injured when an Amtrak passenger train hit a truck stalled on the tracks in central Missouri.

Derailments, collisions and other accidents are a daily occurrence on US railroads. According to the Federal Railroad Administration, last year there were 8,076 train accidents which injured 4,622 people and killed 753, mostly people involved in collisions. Among railroad workers 2,568 were injured and 11 died.

Contributing factors to the high rates of accident include: fatigue due to overwork, especially among conductors and engineers who are on call 24/7 under punishing attendance policies; longer trains, up to three miles in some cases, which are harder to control and wear more heavily on the track, and poor maintenance of the rails themselves, especially as maintenance of way crews have been decimated by years of job losses.

At the same time, the railroads, the most profitable industry in America, are continuing to make money

hand over fist. Union Pacific’s third quarter operating revenue increased 18 percent to \$6.6 billion, the railroad announced late last month.

Across the country, several other significant accidents took place over the past week:

- A woman died Monday morning of injuries sustained when she was hit by a train in Greensboro, North Carolina;

- On Sunday, 15 cars derailed on a Norfolk Southern train in Costonia, Ohio. Some of the cars, which were hauling garbage, dumped their contents into the Ohio River;

- Also on Sunday, a 17 year old was hit by an Amtrak train in Castlewood State Park, near St. Louis, Missouri;

- On Saturday night, a man and his four-year-old son were killed when their vehicle was struck by a train in San Antonio;

- On Wednesday, a Canadian National train derailed in St. James Parish, a rural area near New Orleans. Residents had to be evacuated due to hydrochloric acid leaking from the cars.



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