

Days after Congress passed anti-strike law, railroads launch major escalation in campaign for one-man crews

Tom Hall**19 December 2022**

Railroad workers: Take up the fight for rank-and-file control! Join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee by sending an email to railwrfc@gmail.com, texting (314) 529-1064 or by filling out the form below.

Three of the six major North American railroads have proposals to reduce train crew sizes from two to one, by replacing an on-train conductor with a ground-based “expediter.”

Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern have already informed the Federal Railroad Administration that they are in talks with the unions about implementing pilot programs. BNSF told industry outlet *Trains* that it supports the proposal, revealing that they have “been in negotiations with [conductors’ union] SMART-TD for some time now on a workable transition to ground-based conductors, and could initially include pilot locations.”

The move was announced only two weeks after Congress, at the urging of President Biden, voted to unilaterally impose a five-year contract that workers rejected. This clearly emboldened the carriers, who are now pushing for a massive escalation in their relentless drive for cost savings. The reduction to one-man crews by eliminating the conductor position has been a major target of the railroads for years.

SMART-TD, the largest rail union whose members include conductors, was one of the four unions whose members voted to reject the agreement, which the union bureaucracy had agreed to in Biden-sponsored talks in September.

The move is being presented by the railroads as merely shifting conductors to the new “expediter” position, which would supposedly allow more efficient

repairs to broken-down trains and allow conductors to work stable, set work schedules. But this language cannot conceal the fact that the proposal is for one-man crews, which will inevitably lead to significant job losses among current conductors.

As for the claim that this will help alleviate uncertain working schedules, this is primarily the result of brutal attendance policies imposed by the carriers themselves, including Hi-Viz and Precision Scheduled Railroading, which leave crews on-call 24/7. These schedules have driven so many out of the industry altogether that the total workforce has fallen by 20 percent since 2019.

Railroads also claim the change can be done safely with new technologies, such as Positive Train Control. However, leaving engineers to drive trains by themselves creates an obviously dangerous situation. If an engineer is incapacitated or has a medical emergency while on the train, or his decision-making is impaired due to overwork, there would be no one else in the cab to assist him.

One-man train operations played a significant role in the Lac-Mégantic, Quebec rail disaster in 2013, when a parked train carrying crude oil was left unattended between crews, leading to a derailment and explosion that killed 47. The engineer was one of only three people indicted for the disaster, in a legal travesty that let top management and the railroad’s owners off the hook.

The safety implications of the move are such that even the chief executive of Canadian Pacific, one of the major railroads that has no current plans to implement the scheme, was compelled to acknowledge it. “When you put a train together there’s a lot of moving parts,” Keith Creel was quoted by *Trains* as telling an investor

meeting. “And those moving parts historically have created some challenges. So if a train separates and it’s 10,000-foot long and you don’t have a man or a woman to assist the engineer, that can get complicated. That’s something I’m very sensitive to.”

“Any shift to engineer-only operations in the U.S. would require two things: Approval from the FRA and labor unions,” *Trains* notes. But there is no doubt that it will not encounter serious opposition from either source.

As for the FRA and Washington as a whole, the intervention to prevent a rail strike was only the latest in decades of interventions on behalf of the railroads. Earlier this year, Hi-Viz was implemented unilaterally by BNSF management with the blessing of a federal judge, who also issued an injunction against workers utilizing “self help” against it, including even publicly criticizing it.

Last Tuesday, SMART-TD and the BLET co-sponsored rallies, which included virtually no workers, to give a platform to Democrats who either voted for the anti-strike law or played a crucial role in allowing it to go through, including Bernie Sanders and House members of the Democratic Socialists of America. All of them claimed that they would “fight” against Precision Scheduled Railroading, for paid sick leave, etc. But the fact that the railroads announced their plans for one-man crews the day after the rallies shows they know this is hot air, and that both parties’ real fight is against railroaders seeking to oppose these policies.

The FRA itself has proposed a new rule that supposedly would require two-person crews, which the union bureaucracy hailed with much fanfare. But this rule contains so many loopholes and exceptions that even by the FRA’s own estimation, the number of railroads operating with one-man crews would increase tenfold after the rule took effect.

Even this, however, is too much for the railroads, who want no restrictions at all on their operations. The end result, after any potential legal action by the carriers, would be a regulatory regime that entirely favors the carriers.

Last week, at a public hearing of the federal Surface Transportation Board, SMART-TD President Jeremy Ferguson postured as an opponent of one-man crews, recounting an incident where quick thinking by a conductor saved the life of a three-year old playing on

railroad tracks. But SMART-TD itself had earlier agreed in 2014 to a similar scheme to the “expediter” proposal for BNSF. That was not implemented only because workers overwhelmingly rejected the proposal.

During the national contract talks, Ferguson and the rest of the union bureaucracy across the other rail unions sabotaged the position of railroaders. They ignored unanimous strike votes, promoted the Presidential Emergency Board which sided with the railroads, kept workers on the job after the September 16 strike deadline and attempted unsuccessfully to impose the contract brokered by the Biden administration against huge rank-and-file opposition. They also delayed the contract vote by several weeks in order to buy Congress time to prepare for an intervention to block a strike.

The real opposition to one-man crews comes not from the union apparatus, but from the rank-and-file railroaders. Over the past year, railroaders have organized themselves independently into rank-and-file committees. The election last week in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, which unseated incumbent president Dennis Pierce, shows that rank-and-file anger has not died down after the contract and that workers are searching for a means to fight both the companies and the union apparatus.

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