

# Railroad workers confirm “nasty” toxic train “broke down” two days prior to crash in East Palestine, Ohio

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16 February 2023

*Do you work at Norfolk Southern or another Class I railway? Do you live in East Palestine or a neighboring community? Tell us what you think about the February 3 accident and release of toxic chemicals by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

Two weeks after a massive Norfolk Southern train carrying toxic chemicals derailed and burst into flames just outside East Palestine, Ohio, railroad workers have confirmed to CBS News that the train, which originated in Madison, Illinois, “broke down” the evening of February 1, two days prior to the crash.

Speaking anonymously out of fear of retaliation from the corporation, the workers told CBS that they had major safety concerns prior to the crash due to the train’s length and weight—nearly two miles (2.8 km) long and 18,000 tons—which they said were factors in the derailment.

“We shouldn’t be running trains that are 150 car lengths long,” one of the workers told CBS. “There should be some limitations to the weight and the length of the trains. In this case, had the train not been 18,000 tons, it’s very likely the effects of the derailment would have been mitigated,” they added.

In a separate interview with *Vice* Motherboard on February 15, two railroad workers “with direct knowledge of 32N,” (the designation of the train that derailed) told the outlet that this particular train and route, was a “known safety risk.” 32N travels from St. Louis to the edge of Pittsburgh and “has a reputation,” the workers told the outlet.

In fact, this train and route had such a “notorious” reputation, that the workers dubbed the train the “32 Nasty.”

The workers told *Vice* that prior to derailing, “32 Nasty” had “two mechanical problems” which went “undetected or were ignored in the hours leading up to the crash.”

Security footage obtained from Salem, Ohio, roughly 20 miles outside of East Palestine, appeared to show the massive train on fire roughly 40 minutes before it reached the town.

On Tuesday the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) released a statement confirming that the above footage “appears to be a wheel bearing in the final stage of overheat failure moments before the derailment.”

It is unknown if this is one of the two “known” mechanical problems workers say was “undetected” or “ignored” prior to the crash.

What is known is that in the years leading up to the accident, Norfolk Southern eliminated “key maintenance” positions that are responsible for detecting overheating problems before it leads to an accident, according to Christopher Hand, director of research at the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen (BRS).

In an interview with *FreightWaves*, Hand said that typically hot-box detectors, which use infrared sensors to measure heat on the tracks, are installed every 25 miles and that specialized signalmen, known as “electronic leaders” maintain the hot-boxes.

Hand told the outlet that as recently as three years ago, Norfolk Southern had 5 “electronic leaders” in the region that includes East Palestine. “Today,” Hand told *Freightwaves*, that number is “zero.”

“Once [Norfolk Southern] eliminated that position, it fell to the signal maintainers who had no knowledge, no training or very, very little training on these hot-box detectors,” Hand explained to *FreightWaves*.

Due to vigorous lobbying from the rail industry which spent over \$24.55 million last year buying politicians from both big business parties, according to *OpenSecrets.org*, federal regulations do not require railroads maintain hot-boxes.

“There used to be something called ‘maintenance’ and it was routinely maintaining your apparatus—not just strictly going there when you have a regulated test,” Hand said.

On Thursday in Van Buren Township, outside of Detroit, another Norfolk Southern carrying hazardous material derailed shortly before 9 a.m. As was the case in Ohio, in the immediate aftermath of the crash Norfolk Southern has refused to disclose exactly what hazardous material the train was carrying, only that it has not been breached and that there were “no reports of injuries.”

The February 3 derailment forced the mass evacuation of roughly 4,700 working-class residents of East Palestine on February 5. While not everyone was evacuated from the town, due to the danger of a “massive explosion,” railroad and state officials said they were forced to carry out a “controlled release” of hundreds of tons of volatile

chemicals. Conducted on February 5, this produced a giant black toxic cloud.

The massive toxic chemical plume burned for nearly 48 hours, dispersing chemicals and toxins throughout the atmosphere.

Among the chemicals carried on the train—which was classified as “non-hazardous”—was vinyl chloride. In addition to causing cancer, vinyl chloride can lead to liver, nerve and immunity damage. After burning the chemicals, Norfolk Southern had workers, some photographed without wearing masks, quickly rebuild the track after the burn so the company could resume rail transport through the town.

On Wednesday, CNN reported that, according to an EPA document, Norfolk Southern did not properly dispose of all the contaminated soil before rebuilding the track.

“Contaminated soil will continue (to) leach contaminants, both up into the air, and down into the surrounding ground,” Richard Peltier, an environmental health scientist at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, told CNN in an email following the revelation. “Every time it rains, a flood of new contaminants will enter the ecosystem.”

In their report, CNN said that they had reached out to Norfolk Southern to question them as to why they did not remove all of the “contaminated soil before reopening the site” and if the company had purposefully filled in the contaminated soil in order to “reopen the rail line.”

Connor Spielmaker, a spokesperson for the company, told the outlet that “some soil is moved around” and that Norfolk Southern will continue to “remediate the site.”

Despite the fact Norfolk Southern did not remove all of the chemicals from the contaminated soil around the nearly 50-car train wreck, on February 8, Republican Ohio Governor Mike DeWine and Democratic Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro told residents that they could safely return to their homes. Residents of East Palestine who have returned have reported suffering from rashes, headaches, and other severe respiratory issues, in addition to reporting that the entire town smells like chlorine.

Local resident Melissa Blake, two days after the train derailed, went to the doctor for breathing problems. Her doctor diagnosed her with “acute bronchitis due to chemical fumes.” Blake, after using her recently prescribed inhaler, told CBS that her biggest worry was that the bronchitis she developed following the toxic train derailment “was never going to go away. That it’s going to get worse.”

One of the major issues railroad workers have raised over the years in their discussions with the *World Socialist Web Site* has been the implementation of Precision Scheduled Railroading or PSR by all the major Class I railroads. PSR is a profit-driven management system aimed at keeping the trains running constantly with as few workers and maintenance as possible. Norfolk Southern implemented PSR in 2019.

“Before the carrier instituted Precision Schedule Railroading (PSR), the job and schedule was difficult enough,” a worker told WSWS last

year. “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.”

Explaining the toll the new attendance system took on his health, the Texas railroader said they were forced to “take stimulants to stay awake and sleeping pills to sleep,” to keep up with the new schedule.

While PSR has been detrimental to the health and safety of workers and residents who live near a rail line, the system has been extremely profitable for the rail carriers. Norfolk Southern, which boasts a \$55 billion market capitalization, was able to allocate \$10 billion to buying back their own stock last March, roughly 5,000 times more than the \$2 million the company has offered the town of East Palestine in the wake of the toxic disaster.

Speaking on the growth of trains following the implementation of PSR in the rail industry, Sarah Feinberg, an administrator with the Federal Railroad Administration from 2015 through 2017, told CBS that she “was not happy with the lengths of the trains, and they were 80 or 90 cars long.” Even that is significantly shorter than the 151-car train that crashed two weeks ago.

“The railroads want to decrease costs, and as they are decreasing costs, risks are generally increasing,” Feinberg added. As the trains get longer, the crews are getting smaller. A December report from the Government Accountability Office, concluded that among the seven Class 1’s, including Norfolk Southern, shed over 45,000 workers, nearly 30 percent in recent years.

In the face of these savage profit-driven attacks on workers safety and lives by the rail corporations, the railroad union bureaucracies worked hand-in-glove with the government and the Democratic Party, including Democratic Socialists of America members, to block railroad workers from exercising their democratic right to strike last year.

After the unions failed to wear down workers determination to strike via endless delays and re-votes on the same terrible tentative agreements, both big businesses parties came together in a show of “bipartisan unity” to impose a carrier-friendly contract that Joe Biden signed, which maintained the deadly and dangerous PSR system.

Railroad workers have responded to these attacks by forming the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Unlike the nationalist trade unions which are tied to the Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street, the committee fights independently of the union bureaucracies and capitalist parties to unite workers across craft and national boundaries, against their common class enemies—the rail corporations, union bureaucrats and capitalist parties.



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