

The answer to the East Palestine disaster: Railroad workers' control over safety and working conditions

The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee
20 February 2023

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Brothers and Sisters,

More information is coming out every day about the derailment in East Palestine. But one conclusion is undoubtedly true: The real culprits for this catastrophe sit in Washington and Wall Street.

Railroaders have been warning about the conditions that resulted in the derailment for years. They include the impact of Precision Scheduled Railroading and similar attendance schemes, endless cost-cutting by the railroads, a massive reduction in the size of the nationwide workforce, and a relaxation of inspection and maintenance. These have made the trains ticking time bombs. We all knew that something like this was bound to happen. In fact, it happens every day, where on average there are three derailments in the United States.

The disaster is a direct consequence of Congress' ban on our striking. The conditions on the railroads have been decaying for years. We wanted to fight for better and safer conditions, adequate staffing and maintenance. But the government decided that the profit interests of the railroads are more sacred than our democratic right to strike and even the right of the public to a safe and healthy environment.

This is laying the ground for even more disasters in the future, with the implementation of single-crew "pilot programs" and the contracting out of locomotive maintenance by BNSF. The railroads are violating even the slave charter Congress imposed, because they know Congress and their lackeys in the union bureaucracy

will back them to the hilt.

The same people who banned our strike are now rushing to cover up the scale of the disaster. Both Democrats and Republicans like Ohio Governor Mike DeWine tell residents in East Palestine that it's safe to drink the water, even as the city of Cincinnati, 300 miles downriver, has shut off intake from the Ohio River. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg shrugged off the derailment in a recent statement. There are over 1,000 derailments every year in the US, he said, so what's the big deal? Bernie Sanders leapt to Buttigieg's defense when people objected. "Was he the one driving the train?" Sanders asked, implicitly blaming the rail crew and not Norfolk Southern for the disaster.

This is the consequence of the corporate dictatorship that really controls this country. Congress and the White House justified banning a strike by citing the supposed danger it would pose to the public. But they show complete indifference to the poisoning of an entire town with vinyl chloride. They could not give a damn how many people fall sick and even die. Their only concern is protecting profits from any challenge from the working class.

The role of the union bureaucrats has been to act as agents of the government and the railroads. Last year they worked to enforce the PEB and try to prevent or delay strike action, placing all initiative into the hands of the carriers and the government. Now, the BLET maintains a guilty silence on East Palestine, having not even bothered to publish a statement on its website. SMART-TD President Jeremy Ferguson issued a statement calling on the federal government to "step in." As though they had not already "stepped in" in

December to do the exact opposite! Later, Ferguson openly defended the ban on strike action by claiming Biden acted “for the good the country.”

If we had control of the situation, the outcome in East Palestine would have been entirely different. Safe staffing, shorter trains and adequately maintained locomotives and tracks would have made such a disaster totally unthinkable.

The sacrificing of safety to profit will only end when we control the decision-making and take it out of the hands of the Wall Street speculators and their lackeys. **We must fight for workers’ control over safety and working conditions.** This means much more than insisting merely that we are “stakeholders” whose interests must be taken into account. **We must insist that we have the right to exercise full authority over these decisions, carried out by the rank and file in a democratic decision-making process.** If anything is done which violates our directives, then we must reserve the right to take any and all actions which we deem appropriate.

This is not simply “pie in the sky.” It is necessary because it is the only alternative to the complete collapse of the railroads. Not only railroaders but the country cannot endure the consequences of any more cuts. Therefore, workers must take control out of the hands of those responsible.

In a statement earlier this month, we wrote: “The fight is not over. It is only just beginning.” This is now proven. Everything still depends on us railroaders taking the initiative into our own hands and fighting against the carrier-government-union bureaucracy conspiracy against us.

If you agree with this, then join us! Contact us by **emailing railwrfc@gmail.com or fill out the form below to get involved.**



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