

Two Norfolk Southern rail accidents in four days in Ohio show nothing has been done after East Palestine disaster

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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 know about the Norfolk Southern disaster by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

A fatal accident involving a Norfolk Southern train occurred Tuesday morning at a steel mill in Cleveland, Ohio. According to press reports, 46-year-old Louis Shuster, a Norfolk Southern conductor, was killed when a locomotive collided with a dump truck at a crossing on the premises of Cleveland-Cliffs' Cleveland Works.

According to reports, Shuster, who was also the local president of Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen Division 607, was positioned outside of the locomotive when the collision with the dump truck occurred.

This is the second serious accident in only four days involving Norfolk Southern in the state of Ohio. On Saturday, a massive 212-car, two-mile-long train derailed in Springfield, in the southwestern portion of the state. Twenty cars were involved in the derailment.

These events have taken place barely a month after the catastrophic derailment and toxic chemical release in East Palestine, Ohio, showing that, in spite of empty pledges by railroad management and government officials of “accountability,” the dangerous conditions on the railroads, which make accidents a daily occurrence in the US, are continuing exactly as before.

An official cover-up of the scale of the disaster and threat to public health has been underway in East Palestine. For nearly one month, the Environmental Protection Agency refused to test for dioxins, a highly toxic group of chemicals almost certainly released in the “controlled” burn of chemical tankers after the derailment. Instead, the EPA has ordered Norfolk

Southern to test for dioxins itself. Leaving the fox in charge of the henhouse has already produced flawed tests of the water supply, which Republican Governor Mike DeWine used to falsely claim the drinking water was “safe.”

The Springfield derailment could have been much worse. While it appears that it did not result in a significant release of toxic chemicals—and nothing said by officials can be taken at face value, given the coverup in East Palestine—four tanker cars were among those to have derailed. Officials claimed they were empty at the time. Nevertheless, a shelter-in-place order within a 1,000 foot radius was in effect for 10 hours after the accident, and 1,500 people lost power in the area.

What happened in Ohio in recent days follows other serious accidents involving chemical cars in the weeks following the East Palestine disaster. Late last month, 30 cars derailed from a Norfolk Southern train in Van Buren Township, Michigan, just 30 miles from Detroit. The train included a car carrying liquid chlorine, which did not derail. Last week, a train in Florida operated by the Seminole Gulf Railway derailed near the Sarasota-Brandenton airport. Two cars carrying tens of thousands of pounds of propane were derailed, one of which flipped over on its side. The accident caused serious damage to the tracks and will take days to repair and clean up, according to local officials.

The Cleveland collision highlights the danger of such accidents at industrial sites, where rail crossings often are unmarked and have no barriers. “Typical operation at the mills,” one former steelworker at the plant said on social media. “They killed on average one person every year in their rail operations when I was with the previous owner before Cleveland Cliffs.” The accident also recalls a fatal collision in Detroit at Stellantis' Jefferson North

Assembly Plant in 2021, when an autoworker leaving her shift was struck and killed while driving over a crossing located immediately next to the employee parking lot.

At a town hall last week in East Palestine, attorney Mikal Watts revealed that Norfolk Southern had 3,397 derailments in the past 20 years, or approximately once every two days. But the railroad is far from unique. Across all railroads, there were 1,743 train accidents last year, including 1,164 derailments, according to the Federal Railroad Administration. In these accidents, 978 people were killed, including 11 rail workers. Norfolk Southern ranked third out of seven class I railroads in total accidents (243), behind BNSF (331) and Union Pacific (516). California had by far the highest number of railroad deaths last year (219), with Ohio ranked 11 with 19 deaths.

After downplaying and ignoring the scale of the disaster in East Palestine, which poisoned the atmosphere, the soil and the water with more than a million pounds of highly toxic chemicals such as vinyl chloride, government and railroad officials have introduced various fig leaf measures to appease public anger. On March 1, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, who only weeks earlier downplayed the disaster in an interview by citing the fact that more than 1,000 derailments occur every year, announced new safety initiatives involving inspections of tracks and aging tanker cars. A bill along similar lines has been introduced in the Senate by Ohio senators J. D. Vance (R) and Sherrod Brown (D).

The major railroads also announced that they would back a federal “close call” voluntary reporting program, after years of opposition, and internal documents indicated that Norfolk Southern, the day after the Springfield derailment, discussed limiting trains to 10,000 feet (3 kilometers) long. In the past, even trains that were 5,000 feet long would have been considered to be on the upper threshold of acceptable size.

None of these measures, if implemented, would address the underlying issues, well known to railroad workers, which include tens of thousand of job cuts and corner-cutting to maintenance that have seriously undermined safety on the railroads. The railroads—which enjoy the highest profit margins of any industry in America—have used these profits not to improve the safety of railroad workers and the public but to finance billions of dollars a year in share buybacks.

Many of these half-measures have been walked back almost as soon as they were introduced. NS later “updated” its safety guidance to require that trains only

over 10,000 feet in length would be operated with distributive power (DP), remote-controlled engines placed at different points of long trains to reduce strain on the cars in front of and behind them.

The Senate bill has already encountered predictable resistance from Republicans. They are playing their assigned role within the two-party system by pushing for the most nakedly pro-business policies, to either stymie any and all industry regulations or set the stage for a reactionary “compromise” with Democrats.

Meanwhile, railroads are expanding other unsafe practices. According to a union announcement, CSX plans to shut down audible alarms for defect detectors in locomotive cabs, ostensibly to “test” crews to ensure that they respond correctly. This was a major factor in the lead-up to the East Palestine derailment, which was caused by a wheel bearing failure in a train car. Eyewitness footage captured the bearing visible in flames 20 miles before the train reached East Palestine, but an audible alarm sounded in the cab only shortly before the accident, when a defect detector recorded the temperature of the bearing at more than 200 degrees above ambient temperature.

The railroads have no reason to change anything because they are backed to the hilt by both parties. Only three months ago, Congress passed on bipartisan lines a law banning railroaders from carrying out a national strike, in which safety and staffing would have been the key issues, and imposing a contract sponsored by the Biden administration that workers already rejected. They were aided by the corrupt union bureaucracy, which worked with Biden to keep workers on the job for months after the expiration of onerous legal restrictions on their right to strike. This basic fact is all but ignored in the reporting on East Palestine by the corporate press, which had openly called for an anti-strike law at the time.



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