

Norfolk Southern alleges defective railcars may have contributed to recent derailment

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In an attempt to deflect blame for a recent spate of high-profile derailments, American railroad Norfolk Southern has alleged that possible manufacturing defects with some of its railcars could be the fault.

The railroad infamously poisoned the working class town of East Palestine, Ohio, in early February. After a derailment of railcars carrying toxic substances, the contents were deliberately burned, releasing harmful substances into the local area's waterways, soil and air.

Since then, derailments have continued on a regular basis across the US, while both big business parties, the Democrats and Republicans, as well as the mainstream media, work to cover up this massive social crime.

Norfolk Southern released a press statement on March 9 about an "urgent safety issue" related to a derailment of a 212-car train in Springfield, Ohio, that occurred on March 4. According to the statement, the company discovered while cleaning up the site that "a specific model and series of railcars had loose wheels, which could cause a derailment."

The railcars in question are manufactured by National Steel Car (NSC), a company located in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Norfolk Southern's aim with the press release is to imply that these alleged defects could be the same reason for the massive derailment in East Palestine.

In response to the press release, the Association of American Railroads issued a continental advisory on the same day urging its members to idle railcars that used wheelsets mounted by NSC.

Transport Canada, the federal ministry overseeing railroads in the country, directed Canadian railroad companies to immediately take similar action. According to a worker at National Steel Car who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Canadian National, which owns the tracks running out of the NSC plant, temporarily halted the passage of railcars during the week of March 6, causing them to pile up in the yard. The backlog has since

been removed.

Around 675 railcars manufactured by NSC between August 2022 and March of this year have been identified as potentially having this issue, although no conclusive evidence exists that manufacturing defects were the cause of one or more derailments. An official NSC statement noted that "no conclusions have been reached at this time as to any cause" in the Springfield derailment.

Norfolk Southern certainly has ample grounds for desiring a scapegoat on which to pin the blame for the recent East Palestine disaster. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in a perspective shortly after the derailment, the source of the endless series of so-called "accidents" in the rail industry is the profit motive of the railroad corporations and the capitalist system as a whole:

The reasons for this high rate of accidents are well-known to 120,000 railroaders in the US. The locomotives, railroads and workforce have been driven into the ground by years of cost-cutting by management. Trains have been lengthened to up to three miles long, controlled by only two people. Because of Precision Scheduled Railroading and similar attendance policies, workers are often forced to operate these massive machines with only a couple of hours of sleep.

National Steel Car is no less ruthless in its pursuit of profit than its railroad customers. The company operates a brutal workplace regime at its Hamilton plant, which has earned the nickname "National Death Car" and "National Coffin" among employees for the high number of deaths on the job. Its owner, the convicted fraudster and multi-millionaire Greg Aziz, utilizes a highly exploitative piecework system to squeeze as much profit as possible

out of the company's 1,500 employees.

Last June, 51-year-old welder Quoc Le was brutally killed on the job after a 2,000 pound bulkhead fell on him. In an interview with a fellow NSC worker, it was revealed that Le, despite being an experienced welder, was inadequately trained for the particular job he was assigned to, and was brought in at the last minute as a substitute because of the company's notoriously high turnover rate. The previous few years have witnessed a series of preventable deaths.

Since Le's death, little has been done to improve safety at the plant. Just weeks ago, the company was cited by the Ontario Ministry of Labour for excessive manganese fumes, a byproduct of welding specific metals. A ventilation system that management called state-of-the-art was shown to be completely useless. Presented with the options of overhauling it or providing personal protective equipment to workers, the company decided to go with the cheaper alternative of giving half face respirators with disposable cartridges to employees on the production line.

A semi-permanent regiment of ministry investigators is present at the plant as a concession to the massive outrage among the workers that erupted last summer following Le's death. Workers walked out en masse after their colleague was killed and were joined by other workers and supporters in the city. Along with the spate of violent deaths, COVID-19 ran rampant with no safeguards in the plant and injuries like crushed limbs and strains in every part of the body are a common daily experience for workers.

The Ministry of Labour has carried out "investigations" after every death at NSC, and each time issued fines or warnings that constitute nothing but a slap on the wrist. For Aziz and company shareholders, who are acutely aware of the dangers of working at NSC, this is the price of doing business, and a trifling one at that.

Like their counterparts in the railroad unions, who sold out their 100,000 members last winter and prevented them from going out on strike, the United Steelworkers (USW), who represent NSC employees, have done nothing to improve safety, working conditions or pay for their members. In fact, their pro-capitalist perspective is the reason for the rampant exploitation and risk that continues at the company.

After Le's death, USW officials, including USW District 6 Director Myles Sullivan and Local 7135 President Frank Crowder, made bombastic speeches at a brief demonstration outside the plant, but limited their calls to appeals to the government—the same one that for

years has turned a blind eye to the slaughterhouse conditions at NSC, no matter which political party was in power.

Like every other union, the USW tells its members that conditions can only be improved by appealing to company shareholders to keep jobs in Canada, thereby demonizing workers' class brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico and around the world. They tell their members to vote for the big business Liberals or New Democratic Party at the polls, even though these parties have imposed ruthless austerity measures on the working class and criminalized every strike that threatened to escape union control.

In one contract struggle after another at NSC, the USW bureaucracy has ensured sellout contracts that have whittled down workers' pay, benefits and pensions. This includes a 2012 sellout contract in which two-tier wages were introduced for the first time and pensions were split.

As NSC workers prepare for the upcoming contract negotiations this spring, they must follow the example of their class brothers and sisters on the American and Canadian railroads, who have formed rank-and-file committees to seize control of their struggle from a set of privileged union bureaucrats.

Nothing is won without a fight, and the task is not to appeal to the bosses or politicians, but to wage a struggle against capitalism and for the international political unity of the working class. We encourage NSC workers to contact us today to learn how to build a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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