

Norfolk Southern announces limited paid sick leave for railroad engineers

Alex Findijs
24 May 2023

Class I railroad corporation Norfolk Southern (NS) and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) have announced a deal to offer five days of paid sick leave to locomotive engineers. The deal will cover 3,300 engineers at NS, following similar deals reached earlier this year at other railroads. However, this is the first such deal in any Class I to include members of train crews, who previously had zero days paid sick leave and are subject to brutal scheduling systems which leave them on call for 24 hours a day. NS says that 98 percent of its workforce now has access to some amount of paid sick time.

Additionally, union officials and NS also announced that the paid sick leave would be accompanied by a second agreement with provisions addressing “additional preservation of earnings unique to Norfolk Southern engineers, when they use paid sick leave, as well as greater protection for vacation time, further enhancing the paid sick leave deal.” The agreement is contingent upon this second deal being ratified by NS engineers. The exact details of this second agreement have not been announced as of this writing.

The five days of sick time is one more than other workers were given at NS. However, other sections of railroaders were given the ability to spend three days of regular paid time off as sick leave while engineers were only given the ability to use two, making the deal more or less the same across the board for NS railroaders.

NS engineers are the first engineers in the country to receive paid sick leave. Paid sick leave, and scheduling in general, was one of the central issues last year when 120,000 railroaders were pushing for a national strike, before that was pre-emptively banned by Congress last winter. Workers were demanding significantly more time off, the abolishment of the hated Hi-Viz and Precision Scheduled Railroading system that keeps

train crew constantly on call 24/7 and penalizes workers for taking time off of work. With the new agreement workers will not be penalized for taking their allotted time off, but the vast majority of quality of life issues remain unresolved.

Anger remains high among rail workers about the ban on strike action that had been authorized almost unanimously by the railroaders. It was aided and abetted by the rail union bureaucracy, who stalled for time for months to give Congress the opportunity to outlaw the strike. The next contract negotiations are set to begin in just two years and both the union bureaucracy and the rail company executives have clearly made it a priority to work out minor concessions on paid time off in an effort to stave off unrest within the workforce.

The campaign to provide limited sick days is also being used to distract from the strike ban itself, as well as the role played by the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party. After voting in favor of the strike ban in the House and impose a contract with no sick leave, the Democratic Socialists of America pivoted immediately towards a toothless campaign “demanding” the railroads voluntarily give up seven days of paid sick leave. Bernie Sanders, who did not vote in favor of the anti-strike bill but who played a key role in the parliamentary maneuvering to ensure its passage, has also been centrally involved.

The vast majority of rail crew members, including at the other five of six Class I railroads and even members of the SMART-TD union at Norfolk Southern, still have no paid sick days at all. No doubt a particular motivation of NS to expand limited sick leave to engineers was to stave off rank-and-file unrest and to repair the damage to the company’s public image in the aftermath of the derailment of an NS train near East

Palestine, Ohio three months ago.

A “controlled release and burn” of chemical tankers involved in the accident spewed catastrophic levels of toxic chemicals into the environment, which are still being found by independent tests, while the working class residents of the town are being left to fend for themselves by the railroad and the government.

Following the deal, the union and rail executives fawned over each other and their commitment to “partnership.”

“We are proud to be the first to have reached a paid sick leave agreement for our dedicated BLET membership,” said Dewayne Dehart, a union general chairman. “This trailblazing new deal ensures that engineers finally have access to the time they need and deserve to manage their personal well-being.”

Jerry Sturdivant, BLET general chairman for NS-Southern Lines added that “Our agreement with Norfolk Southern recognizes the critical contributions our members make to keep the railroad and the American economy running. Our members are the hardest-working folks on the railroad, and we thank NS for their collaboration to get this deal done for them.”

In a Freudian slip, Wai Wong, vice president of Labor Relations at Norfolk Southern referred to BLET officials as “*our* BLET general chairmen” (emphasis added) and thanked them for their “partnership.”

Scott Bunten, a BLET general chairman, said that he felt NS was trying to be seen as a “better, kinder, gentler railroad.” In other words, BLET is consciously using the issue of sick leave to help the company refurbish its image.

Alan H. Shaw, president and CEO of Norfolk Southern, responded by saying, “I deeply appreciate the contributions of our Norfolk Southern engineers and the longstanding partnership we’ve had with the BLET. This agreement builds on that relationship and continues our industry-leading effort to enhance quality of life as we become the first railroad to reach an engineer sick leave deal.”

In congressional hearings on the East Palestine disaster, Shaw stonewalled and refused to make even verbal concessions over multi-billion-dollar share buybacks or support for limited safety legislation. He was clearly emboldened by the fact that Washington backed the railroads to the hilt against railroad workers and continues to give the railroads a virtual blank check

on derailments, which occur three times a day on average in the US.

The sick leave is therefore essentially being held hostage from workers and will only be released upon the condition they ratify additional agreements. As is typical with union backdoor deals, workers may not even see the details until they are given a ballot to vote on it.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact