

CSX worker killed on the job at Baltimore rail terminal

Leon Gutierrez
28 June 2023

On Monday, a CSX conductor trainee, Derek Scott Little, was reported killed on the job due to an accident at the Seagirt Marine Terminal worksite in Baltimore, Maryland. He was only 28 years old.

As is commonplace when a worker dies, the media hardly picked up on the death, with the only news outlet reporting on the incident being a local affiliate of CBS. CBS Baltimore merely cites the company's self-serving press statement, which notes that "safety of our railroaders is CSX's highest priority."

According to workers, Little was a recent hire and a father-to-be who had only been with CSX for about three months. Workers at the site told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) that Little was riding a "shove," or a rail car in the opposite direction of his trainer, when he suddenly slack-rolled out between rail cars, causing him to fall off and be run over by the incoming train.

"The job [Little] was working was assembling the trains in the yard, which involves coupling, uncoupling cars, operating switches, and communicating with the engineer," reported a worker familiar with the incident. "Often they ride on the back of the last car hanging from the side. They hold on to grab irons with one hand and communicate with the engineer on the other end of the train by radio telling him how much distance before he needs to stop.

"From what we were told he was thrown off by slack action. Every coupler has a little slack in it, but the more cars, the more violent it is starting and stopping at the opposite end of the train from the locomotive. It was also raining here on and off all night, slippery hand holds and rungs I'm sure contributed to him not being able to hang on."

Another railroad worker said, "My only concern is the company putting financial gains over employee

safety. Why is a trainee working at night? Was he alone? In this unforgiving industry I think a more seasoned employee should have been with him. We have trainees in position of trainers, that's unacceptable."

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in 2021 that a workplace injury occurred every 101 minutes in the United States. Nearly 5,200 workplace deaths were recorded in America that year, a 9 percent increase from the year before, yet still likely a vast undercount.

In an internal email, CSX President and CEO Joe Hinrichs stated that Little had "suffered fatal injuries last night as a result of an unfortunate accident" and that his "deepest sympathies go out to his family, friends, and coworkers during this difficult time."

Attempting to avoid any responsibility and implicitly place the blame on workers for their injuries and deaths, Hinrichs continued, "I urge everyone to redouble your commitment to following safety protocols," claiming that Little's was "the first loss of life on our railroad in over two years, the longest such stretch in our history."

In fact, the rail industry is notoriously dangerous. According to the National Safety Council (NSC), "Railroad deaths totaled 893 in 2021, a 20% increase from the 2020 revised total of 744 and the highest since 2007." In addition, the Federal Railroad Administration reported about 1,164 derailments last year, or about three derailments a day.

Aaron Gordon, a reporter for Vice Motherboard, has written that "industrywide, since 2016, according to government data, the workforce of the freight rail industry has been reduced by 30%." Gordon states that while rail operators may claim they have managed to maintain safe operations, "I have not heard that from anyone who actually works on the railroads. Instead,

what they tell me is they have less time and fewer resources to do their jobs.”

Gordon notes that at Northfolk Southern, the rail company responsible for the toxic derailment outside of East Palestine, Ohio, earlier this year, “workers used to have two to three minutes to inspect each railcar, and each railcar can be up to 100 feet long. They’re inspecting ... more than 100 points on the train to make sure that it’s safe to run. And now they have fewer than 90 seconds.”

Earlier this month, a CSX locomotive crash at a CSX railyard in Baltimore resulted in a diesel fuel spill that poisoned the air at the site and the adjacent Curtis Bay community. The fuel spill followed an explosion at another Baltimore CSX site, a coal pier, where CSX got away with a wrist-slap fine of about \$15,000 to the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) and \$100,000 to the South Baltimore Community Land Trust, an infinitesimal fraction of the company’s annual profits.

Emboldened by the broader conspiracy of Wall Street, the Biden administration and the rail union bureaucracy against railroaders, the railroads have continued to move aggressively to attack workers. Last month CSX locked out 40 car haulers at a CSX site in Annapolis Junction, Maryland, operated by a subsidiary, while weeks prior, on May 17, due to the debt limit “crisis,” the Biden administration directly cut railroader unemployment and sickness benefits by 5.7 percent.

The railroads are directly responsible for the type of conditions that allowed the loss of the young railroader’s life to take place. Railroaders routinely walk into hazardous worksites with no guarantee of coming back.

The Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employee Division (BMWED) has released no comments on the death of Little. The rail union bureaucracy has in fact assiduously worked to subjugate railroaders to the interests of Wall Street and the Biden administration. They played a critical role in blocking a national rail strike last year. Since their betrayal, they have launched a cynical campaign of begging the railroad CEOs to no avail to improve the conditions of the railroads.

Another CSX employee, Will, a maintenance worker, placed the tragedy into a broader context. He said to the WSWs, “The death of this man lays directly at the feet

of the parasites on Wall Street and their spineless lackeys installed in railroad management.” He blamed the death on the company’s profit drive, which caused a “shortage of workers.”

Railroaders cannot turn to the railroad CEOs, the Biden administration or the union bureaucracy to improve their safety conditions. Railroaders must organize the political struggle for better conditions independently of the rail union bureaucracies through rank-and-file worker organizations such as the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact