BNSF announces 362 job cuts, continuing railroad jobs bloodbath in the US

Bill Mertz
4 March 2024

Railroad workers: Tell us how job cuts are affecting you. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) railway announced last week that it was cutting 362 jobs from its Mechanical Department. This comes after a 4th quarter 2023 profit in excess of $1.3 billion. The largest Class I railroads, only six of which exist in the US, are among the most profitable companies in the United States, with total 2023 profits in excess of $24 billion.

"We have team members in locations on the network where there isn't sufficient work and simultaneously not enough team members where the growth is occurring," the company claimed to industry outlet FreightWaves.

This is absurd. The reality is the railroad, as with its rivals across the country, have cut jobs to the bone. This has produced an unending series of dangerous accidents, including an average of three derailments per day in the United States.

Last year, only weeks after Congress passed a bipartisan anti-strike law to impose a contract on 120,000 railroad workers, BNSF began contracting out some locomotive maintenance to non-union companies, claiming it was necessary to meet a backlog due to "winter weather." This action was met with impotent squeaks of protest by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the International Association of Machinists.

Shortly before BNSF announced these layoffs, the Association of American Railroads petitioned the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) to grant a waiver allowing Class I railroads to be exempt from performing locomotive safety inspections "on account of winter weather." BNSF mandated six-day work weeks for their mechanical employees to catch up the backlog. Then, the company subsequently began layoffs. Railroad workers will recognize this pattern of decision-making typical of the railroads, in which safety and maintenance are sacrificed for Wall Street share values.

BNSF also claimed to Freightwaves that the company "has offered location transfers with incentives … BNSF has also offered craft transfers for mechanical employees to be retrained …" But these options are unacceptable to many workers as transfers to other locations or crafts often result in the loss of seniority, basically forcing workers to restart their careers at the bottom of the seniority rosters, as well as uprooting their families with relocation.

On February 29, 2024, the Transportation Trades Department of the AFL-CIO published a letter to Amit Bose, the administrator of the FRA, imploring the FRA to conduct surprise inspections on BNSF equipment "and further issue non-compliance orders requiring BNSF to repair any defects before being permitted to utilize their locomotives and railcars." The full letter is here.

The latest round of cuts is part of the tens of thousands of job losses since 2017 Last December, Union Pacific cut over 1,300 track maintenance jobs.

The cuts are a continuation of the "Precision Scheduled Railroading" (PSR) scheme first introduced by late CSX CEO Hunter Harrison and then by his imitators. This resulted in the elimination of approximately 30,000 positions throughout the Class I carriers, with stress and overwork for remaining employees due to understaffing, insufficiently maintained equipment and service meltdowns. This rampage culminated in a near strike by angry rail workers, a strike that was betrayed at the last minute by the rail union bureaucracies.

Meanwhile, service and safety continues to deteriorate. On February 12, 2024, a CSX train derailed eight cars in Morgan County, West Virginia, due to a track geometry defect, releasing hazardous material. The very same week, also on CSX, Randall M. Howell, 41, a track foreman with 17 years of railroad service, was struck and killed by a piece of track maintenance equipment in Roanoke, North Carolina.

© World Socialist Web Site

This took place a few days after the one year anniversary of the Norfolk Southern derailment that poisoned the town of East Palestine, Ohio, spewing tons of vinyl chloride into the environment and sickening residents and workers. Last week, another NS train derailment sent cars and three locomotives into a riverbank in eastern Pennsylvania.

Workers had the opportunity to wage a massive struggle against the profit-driven crisis on the railroads after they voted down a sellout contract brokered by the Biden Administration in late 2022. Instead, the union bureaucracies worked with the railroad companies and their government puppets to defy the democratic will of the workers by unilaterally agreeing to numerous extensions of the “cooling off period,” and buying time for Congress and the Biden administration to impose the hated contract upon railroad workers.

Workers must organize themselves outside of control of the trade union bureaucracies to fight for the needs of the working class. The Railroad Workers Rank and File Committee was at the forefront of the struggle to free workers from the straitjacket of the union-corporate-government conspiracy, holding large online meetings and organizing informational pickets at facilities around the country.

Workers in all industries and internationally must unite to fight against job cuts on a world scale. Huge corporations are slashing hundreds of thousands of jobs in a bid to lower wages and shatter the growing resistance of the working class.

The destruction of jobs and vital infrastructure, the incitement of war and genocide, the increasing exploitation of the working class all require a fight by the working class against the capitalist system. The working class must take control of all vital industries and place them under democratic, public control, and using them for the advancement of society, not for the enrichment of the ruling class.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site