

BNSF cuts time-off allocations for US railroaders after 2024 days go “unused”

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14 January 2025

Rail workers at BNSF or other carriers, has your attendance policy recently changed? Share your experience by filling out the form below.

BNSF, the freight railroad owned by billionaire Warren Buffett, has unilaterally reduced workers’ ability to use time off. The move comes as the rail unions are attempting to push through another round of sellout contracts which are even worse than the deal imposed by Congress in 2022.

The company has reduced time-off allocations—the number of workers who can use their paid time off on a given day—by at least 25 percent. The move comes after BNSF significantly decreased how many days railroaders could request by “charging” more points per request under their despised Hi-Viz points-based system in April 2024.

These scheduling changes apply to engineers and conductors (TY&E) who are expected to always be on-call, work in near-isolation, alternate between day and night shifts on short notice, and must work unbroken spans of 14 or more days to accrue any time-off points but can lose all their points for a single request off.

In 2022, workers rebelled against a new sellout contract which contained no guaranteed sick days. Railroaders are among the most overworked sections of the working class in America, with 80- or even 100-hour work weeks common and train crews unable to spend time with their families. They are also under the anti-worker Railway Labor Act, which severely restricts their legal right to strike.

BNSF is especially hated for its “Hi Viz” points-based attendance policy, which it imposed unilaterally even without going through the motions of contract talks. In early 2022, the issue went to court, where a federal judge predictably sided with management on “national security” grounds.

Railroad management almost lost control when workers

voted down a White House-backed contract, pushing instead for a national strike. An instrumental role was played by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which campaigned against the deal and urged workers to take matters into their own hands. The RWRFC is also urging workers to reject the new round of contracts.

Following Congress’ bipartisan strike ban, BNSF and the other railroads voluntarily gave up fig-leaf sick days in order to tamp down on popular anger, a move which union officials hailed at the time. But now, workers are finding out that what is given is easily taken away.

2025 schedules shared with the *World Socialist Web Site* from Workforce Hub, the BNSF employee portal, reveal that the maximum number of crewmen allowed each day to “lay off”—use their accrued time off—was reduced from 20 to 15 out, of over 200 workers at the largest BNSF terminal.

As a result, most of the year was instantly booked nearly to capacity, preventing workers from requesting off for special occasions, family events, or any emergent events during the year. One worker commented on social media, “[At] my terminal, we only have 40 guys total and our allocation per day is 1.”

Railroaders discovered the policy change through haphazard announcements from managers, which claimed workers had a surplus of points at the end of 2024 that went “unused.” Many took to social media to confirm the rumors and denounce this attack on workers.

“[BNSF] already made allocations for time off on weekends impossible,” commented one worker as to why they had “unused” days off. Another agreed: “trying to get medical leave has been a nightmare for me.”

The fact that this major policy change has been made unilaterally by the carriers and conveyed disjointedly by managers is an indictment of the union bureaucrats that nominally represent railroaders at the six Class I carriers.

Management feels emboldened to tighten the screws on workers because they have the support of union officials, who at the same time are also joining ranks with the ultra-right Trump government.

Rail workers have been battling worsening conditions since the 2022 strike ban. The union bosses played the decisive role in this historic defeat, unsuccessfully trying to sow illusions in the Biden administration's intervention, then attempting to pass the deal using threats and lies, and, finally, when workers voted it down, delaying a legally-sanctioned strike to provide Congress time to organize a counteroffensive.

The lack of adequate time off, including for medical and family reasons, was a key demand in the 2022 dispute and catapulted the plight of railroaders to national attention. If skilled workers in the most profitable industry in America could be treated like indentured servants, then whose livelihoods were safe?

The 2022 agreement, finalized three years into a five-year contract, rapidly expired and bargaining for a new contract began in 2024. Rail carriers and union bureaucrats, licking their wounds, made extensive preparations to avoid a repeat of the 2022 showdown. They are currently attempting to break workers' unity by negotiating tentative agreements craft by craft, union by union, in some cases even region by region—a repudiation of the national pattern bargaining of the past.

However, a brief look at the proposed contracts revealed they were nearly carbon copies—a national pattern agreement in all but name. The fact that the union bureaucrats not only permitted this divide-and-conquer strategy but endorsed the tentative agreements exposed their role as agents of management.

The union apparatuses are such reliable handmaidens of the rail carriers' anti-worker policies that the latter feel emboldened to impose their diktats without even the fig-leaf of "negotiation" and "compromise"—all this while bargaining over contracts continues.

Summing up the mood among railroaders, one worker commented, "[T]hey want us right under their thumb. This is the worst morale has been in my time here."

The mass exodus of experienced railroaders from the industry over unbearable conditions—a third of the workforce have left without replacement in the past decade—comes at a time when rail safety is under critical attack and the entire nation is placed on a war footing, focused intensely on infrastructure and logistics, especially the rails and docks.

Train lengths have doubled to nearly three miles in

recent years, contributing to mounting derailments that now occur an average of three derailments per day. This includes the catastrophic derailment in East Palestine, Ohio in 2023 that released 1.1 million pounds of vinyl chloride into the atmosphere, resulting in a meager settlement. Later that year, Union Pacific laid off over 1,300 maintenance of way workers, or half its workforce.

At the same time, rail carriers have pressed to reduce train crews from the historically low two-person crews to just a single engineer. BNSF train and engine service workers rejected a tentative agreement in November that would have paved the way for one-man crews, the third such TA to be rejected in recent months.

Rail workers need to draw their own conclusions. The railroads are exceptionally profitable—wealth that can be used to invest in a trained workforce, salaries, pensions, paid time off, safety measures, and new equipment, including technology to assist, not replace, workers in the safe fulfillment of their jobs.

However, workers must decisively break with the corporatist trade unions, whose bureaucrats defend the "right" of billionaires to profit off their labor and espouse the toxic "America first" nationalism that leads workers into a race-to-the-bottom fight against their brothers and sisters around the world.

The Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee is the only independent organization by, for, and of workers fighting to unite North American railroaders across crafts to reverse the historic decline in their living standards and place the leadership of this vital industry under the control of workers. It has called on railroaders to reject the sellout deals cooked up behind their backs. To join or contact the Committee, please fill out the form below.



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