

“I would love to strike”: Wyoming railroader speaks out on safety issues at BNSF caused by “Hi-Viz” attendance policies

Bryan Dyne
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Rail workers who wish to share their experiences or join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee can contact the WSWs by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Working conditions continue to deteriorate among railroad workers in the United States, as a result of draconian attendance policies and massive overwork in one of the country’s most profitable industries. At BNSF, owned by Warren Buffett’s Berkshire Hathaway, workers face a particularly brutal “Hi-Viz” attendance system that penalizes workers for taking time off, even for medical appointments.

The point system, which BNSF unilaterally implemented and recently made more severe, has transformed railroad work into a dehumanizing experience where workers must choose between their health, families and keeping their jobs. Taking a single day off can cost up to 25 “points” in the system, while 25 consecutive days of availability earns only 5 points.

Following our January exposé of BNSF’s attendance policy changes and subsequent letters from railroaders denouncing these conditions as “slave labor,” the WSWs spoke at length with Jonah, a BNSF worker for over 10 years. Jonah’s name has been changed to protect him from retaliation.

This interview also comes amid growing opposition among railroaders to Precision Scheduled Railroading (PSR), job cuts and extended train lengths that have contributed to disasters like the East Palestine, Ohio, derailment in early 2023.

Fresh off a 12-hour shift, Jonah explained how BNSF has de facto cut workers’ pay. “What we’ve been running into lately is that we’re no longer getting paid for being on the extra board, which is where we put ourselves to be on standby if somebody takes time off work or is on vacation. We used to get paid whether or not we actually went in, because it’s like being on call.

“But they’ve started cutting the extra board way down and moving all those guys to the regular pool. And the regular pool guys only get paid for when they go to work. So now you’ve got a surplus amount of guys sitting on the regular pool just sitting around, not making any money, not going to work.”

When asked about the impact on workers’ livelihoods, Jonah

responded, “You’re used to making five grand a paycheck. And now, because you’re sitting around for more time, you’re making maybe \$1,500, \$2,000 less than you were before.”

Jonah said that BNSF has been “increasing our train lengths” and “trying to do more with less because they haven’t really hired anybody in forever.” The few new employees they have hired “don’t stick around because of this Hi-Viz policy that they’ve put into place. People realize that they don’t have to put up with that. They go find something else.”

He also expressed frustration with the rail unions. “Our union dues are ridiculous. And that just feels like wasted money to me, because the union’s not doing anything to help. They’re not standing up for us. They’re not trying to tell the company that what they’re doing is unfair. I feel like the union just doesn’t care about us anymore.”

In late 2022, the union bureaucrats kept workers on the jobs after they rejected a White House-brokered deal, buying Washington time to pass a bipartisan strike ban. The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee was formed earlier that year to oppose the bureaucrats’ betrayal and fight to overturn it, in order to prepare for a national strike. It played a major role in organizing opposition to the sellout.

In the ongoing contract negotiations, the SMART-TD conductors union is helping to eliminate the permanent brakeman/helper role on trains, reducing crews to one man. “On September 19 of last year, before anybody had even seen a rough draft of what this contract is going to look like, BNSF was posting on their Facebook page that they had come to an agreement with SMART-TD on a contract,” Jonah recalled. “No one in the membership had seen it yet.”

When the contract was finally presented, it proposed eliminating the brakeman/helper position while offering a one-time \$27,000 bonus. “They put it to a vote. It was voted down tremendously, like 90 percent just off the top of my head,” Jonah said. Instead of respecting members’ wishes, “they went to an arbitration board and it was crammed down everybody’s throats. The arbitration board said it’s going to pass as written.

“January 4, I believe, immediately after this contract was forced through, BNSF changed their ‘high-viz’ policy to make

it to where those days you take off would cost you 10 points on a weekday, 15 points on a weekend and then being available for call for 25 days just to get five points back. So everybody feels like that was in retaliation—they're not even hiding it at this point. They're trying to show us that they're pissed off at us for telling the company we didn't want that contract."

Railway safety is also a major concern. "I was on the safety committee back when we had one here at BNSF and then I think it's about two years ago they decided that they didn't want to spend money on that anymore so they dissolved us," Jonah explained. "Since then we've been seeing working conditions just going to sh*t—like equipment not being maintained."

Now, Jonah said, "I can still report a safety issue and then six months later it's still there."

The increasing lengths of the trains has created additional safety problems. "They're making trains so long now that [radio signals] don't work between flashing red light on the end of the train and the head. You lose radio communication regularly," Jonah explained. "If something happens and the conductor has to go check something out on the back of the train, he's so far away I can't hear him on the radio. It's so unsafe."

Another significant safety concern is the lack of transparency about what materials trains are carrying. "I have my paperwork when I do go to work that tells me what's in every car—well, vaguely tells me what's in every car. Some of the descriptions are very generic like 'scrap material,' but what kind of scrap material is it? Could it potentially be radioactive?"

In the event of an emergency like the East Palestine derailment, train crews might not be able to inform first responders about what's burning or leaking. "If I'm working as a conductor and we derail, I'll use the East Palestine example again and I see that there's smoke and fire back there, I'm not going back there. I couldn't tell you exactly what cars on fire and what's in it," Jonah said. "If something happens, the fire department that comes out has no idea what we've got, what we're dealing with."

Safety is further compromised by the Hi-Viz attendance system, which forces workers to report for duty even when they're exhausted. "Just having that threat above their head makes it feel like we have to go to work or we're going to get punished or fired," he explained. "It comes back to that safety thing—it's just, you've got train crews that are tired running trains with all sorts of nasty chemicals on them up and down the tracks."

Jonah then connected the deteriorating conditions on the railroads to larger political and economic trends. "It seems like we're living in 1930s Germany all over again," he said. When asked about Warren Buffett, whose Berkshire Hathaway owns BNSF, Jonah noted that older coworkers told him "when he took over, when he became the parent company, that's when stuff started to go downhill."

He also expressed concern about the broader economic impact of policies like tariffs. "It'll affect everybody over multiple industries—truck drivers, train drivers, all the way down to even the guys that sell the cars because it's like a river, right? The river flows. It starts at one point and works its way down to the end point and it's going to be bad. It's going to really negatively affect our country."

When discussing how to address these issues, Jonah advocated for unifying engineers and conductors into a single organization controlled by the workers themselves. "In the industry, we've felt for a long time that we need to have the engineers and the conductors—I think we need one union instead of it being divided like this. Even now, it feels like it's one side versus the other. It's like the American government, but on a smaller scale—Democrats, Republicans, conductors versus engineers."

"It's time that we get both sides united, engineers and conductors, and we just make our own. Completely start it over and then maybe that way we would have people from the ranks that will actually represent us and get us fair treatment."

When asked about building the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, of building an organization of the rank and file independent of the union bureaucracy, Jonah responded, "I'd say it's probably doable. I could probably think of three or four guys in my terminal right now that would be interested in that. We definitely need to get all the workforce on the same page and get everybody to where they understand that we do have rights. We do have a voice. Unless we do it together, it's not going to improve."

He also recalled when BNSF CEO Katie Farmer in 2022 said something to the effect that "labor doesn't contribute to profits." "Everybody's kind of still having animosity over that comment," Jonah commented. When asked if he would support a strike, Jonah responded, "I would love to strike."

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