

Railroad companies request Trump administration dismantle two-person crew regulations

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Class I rail companies are requesting that the Trump administration end federal regulations requiring the use of two-person train crews, according to a report by Freight Waves. The request comes after a call from the Department of Transportation on April 3 for businesses to provide comments on deregulation, a central issue for the Trump administration which is dismantling whole departments and cutting hundreds of thousands of federal jobs.

A move to one-man crews would not only cost thousands of conductors their jobs, it would also create even more unsafe conditions than already exist on the railroads. On average, three trains derail in the US every day, as the railroads cut safety to the bone to maximize profit.

One of the most infamous disasters, the 2023 derailment and toxic chemical release in East Palestine, Ohio, was made possible by a combination of defective railcars, whose axles overheated and caught fire, and inadequately spaced wayside detectors which did not detect the problem in time. When the train derailed, Norfolk Southern conducted a “controlled release and burn,” which poisoned the entire town with carcinogens, in order to reopen the track as soon as possible.

From the beginning, the federal government ran interference for the railroad, systematically under-reporting the true scale of chemical exposure in the town, while eventually levying only a \$310 million fine.

The disaster took place only months after Congress and the Biden White House banned a national strike by more than 100,000 Class I railroaders, in which safety was a central issue. After the disaster, even piecemeal reform legislation stalled in Congress while NS CEO Alan Shaw was allowed to dig in his heels in several congressional hearings.

This is the context in which the American Association of Railroads claims that the two-person crew requirement is

“an unsubstantiated mandate that conflicts with the Trump administration’s policy goals of regulatory reform, technological advancement, and data-driven rule-making.”

The AAR further claimed that the regulation was stifling innovation and disrupting investment in the rail industry. In reality, Class I railroads have allowed the country’s decrepit rail infrastructure to fall apart in order to save money.

AAR President and Chief Executive Ian Jefferies said that “For too long, outdated, arbitrary regulations have stood in the way of implementing data-backed solutions that can further strengthen railroads’ already remarkable safety record. As technology advances, railroads must be empowered to innovate—not be hamstrung by prescriptive rules, including some written more than 50 years ago. As a critical economic enabler, domestic growth and prosperity are contingent upon maintaining freight railroads’ ability to safely, reliably and affordably deliver for American businesses and communities.”

Rail companies have claimed for years that two-person crews are unnecessary and no safer than single-person crews. The AAR has even claimed that one-person crews can be safer than two-person crews. Some Class II and III rail lines and commuter Amtrak lines use one-person crews, which the AAR points to as proof of their safety.

However, these are much smaller trains that pale in comparison to the miles-long commercial freight trains used by the Class I railroads on often poorly maintained tracks, like the one that derailed in East Palestine.

Moreover, the AAR claim is not true. In 2013, 47 people were killed after dozens of oil tankers derailed and exploded in the middle of Lac-Mégantic, Quebec. The train had only one crewman, the engineer, who had parked the train on the main line per company policy before leaving for his hotel overnight.

As the WSWWS reported on the two-person mandate last year, the regulation is full of loopholes and exemptions designed to allow Class I railroads to impose one-person

crews under the right circumstances. Rail companies must simply file for an exemption with the federal government if they wish to proceed with one-person crews.

In reality, this system was designed by the Biden administration to lay the groundwork for one-person crews while presenting the facade of defending rail safety. Biden and his Department of Transportation considered this essential to avoiding another confrontation with rail workers after they nearly faced a nationwide rail strike in 2022. Minor regulatory speed bumps to one-person crews were deemed worthwhile to avoid provoking anger from rail workers and to ease in their implementation.

Even these moderate impediments to the corporate steamrolling of regulations on business are deemed too extreme by the Class I railroads. The AAR is even reportedly filing requests for the relaxation of other critical safety regulations, including a reduction in the frequency of inspections of train brakes.

Project 2025, the blueprint for Trump's policies, also outlines two-person crews, as well as mandatory brake, mechanical and track inspections, as key regulations to roll back.

For the ruling class, faced with a spiraling debt crisis, every cent of additional profit must be extracted from the working class. If this cannot be done immediately through the suppression of wages and increased prices, then big business must turn deeper into the dismantling of regulatory frameworks designed to ensure the safety of workers and the public.

Rail companies have for decades skirted essential maintenance of critical infrastructure and have pushed for the reduction of their workforce, but this trend has accelerated since 2020 when the initial shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global supply chains. Now under the naked rule by the oligarchy under the fascist Trump, the rail companies see an opportunity to fully secure their uninterrupted "right" to impose one-person crews and destroy jobs and working conditions.

Estimates of savings from switching to one-person crews are as high as \$2 billion for the rail industry. The same parasitic financial interests that led to the development of three-mile-long freight trains to reduce costs are now gunning for the complete dismantling of safety regulations, beginning with train crews and running headfirst into the most basic safety regulations, in a country where train derailments are already a daily occurrence.

The response of the union bureaucracy has been collaboration. While publicly denouncing one-person crews as unsafe, they allowed the rail companies to implement draconian attendance policies, began test trials of one-person crews and promoted contracts that allow the company to

take the conductor off the train, an essential step in the move to one-person crews.

Significantly, it was the rail unions that initially called off strike action at the last minute in 2022, giving the Biden administration and Congress time to prepare an injunction to block the strike, which they promptly submitted to.

The conductors' union SMART-TD (International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers-Transportation Division) has spent the last several months attempting to ram through contracts setting the stage for one-man crews. Having learned their lesson from 2022, the bureaucrats in the 12 rail unions divided workers up union by union, railroad by railroad, by pushing separate agreements even before the official start of national bargaining.

Meanwhile, the union bureaucracy is moving to the right and falling in line behind the Trump administration, especially endorsing his tariff trade war policies which are already triggering mass layoffs in logistics and transportation.

Even before the election, SMART-TD endorsed fascist Republican Senator Josh Hawley for reelection, citing his support for legislation backing two-person crews. Sean O'Brien, General President of the Teamsters, which also includes the engineers and maintenance of way unions, spoke at the Republican National Convention and is a major Trump ally.

Now in power, the Republican Party will soon dispense with any pretense of maintaining two-person crews to further the profit interests of their oligarchic constituents, either through the direct dismantling of federal regulations or by using the trade unions to help impose pro-corporate policies.

To mobilize resistance requires the building of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, founded in 2022 to fight the unions' betrayals and push for national strike action, as a new alternative leadership. The bureaucracy, which is joined at the hip with management and the government, must be thrown out and power returned to the rank-and-file through new leadership structures which they control.



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