

# Union Pacific conductor killed in Ontario, California

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On the morning of December 3 in Ontario, California, 46-year-old Union Pacific conductor Steve Crowe, known to coworkers as “Lil Crowe” or “Baby Crowe,” was killed in a collision. The train he was riding while backing up collided with a combination vehicle at a private industrial crossing.

Steve was a second-generation railroader. He followed in his father’s footsteps and was admired and cared for by those who worked beside him. They called him “Lil Crowe” as an affectionate acknowledgment of his youth, his energy and his family legacy in the trade.

His death was not an unpredictable “accident” but the result of relentless cuts to safety by US railroads and corporations across the country.

The operation underway in Ontario was what the industry calls a “shoving movement,” that is, when a train reverses, pushing rail cars instead of pulling them. This is, according to every serious rail safety body, the most dangerous procedure a conductor can be assigned.

The National Transportation Safety Board’s (NTSB) Safety Alert SA-103 explains that conductors performing reverse movements have to ride equipment or walk alongside moving rail cars with limited visibility, relying on hand signals or radios while navigating tight clearances, obstructed crossings and unpredictable vehicle traffic.

Of the 20 conductor fatalities reported to the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) from January 2020 to July 2025, 14 occurred during shoving movements. The danger is completely avoidable with modern technology, including fully integrated cameras, automated visibility systems and remote monitoring. But to the extent that they are used at all, it is to harass rail crews and ramp up exploitation, not make the job safer.

Crowe’s death has devastated those who knew him.

His coworkers, friends and community have filled online forums with comments expressing both grief and outrage. Their remarks speak to a person who was deeply respected and to the collective understanding that this never should have happened. “Steve was a second-generation railroader and an exceptional coworker,” said one.

A close friend wrote a heart-rending tribute that many have echoed:

Steve Crowe was a friend, a person that gave us all great memories. Someone we laughed with, hung out with. He was a good man, always made me laugh, always knew how to cheer someone up. His energy was like no one else, always a happy man. Rest in peace brother ?? We will never forget you.

Another coworker, wrote:

Lil Crowe was a really good person both on and off the railz. Others call him Baby Crowe, but it shows how much we liked him. We had many nice terms of endearment for the youngster.

The freight rail industry has been transformed into a plaything of Wall Street investors over decades of bipartisan deregulation and financialization. The Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Reform Act of 1976 and the 1980 Staggers Act removed public oversight and unleashed a frenzy of profit-driven

restructuring. Railroads consolidated into a handful of financial behemoths whose primary objective is not reliable operation but relentlessly reducing the “operating ratio” demanded by investors.

This “efficiency revolution” reached a new stage on the eve of the 21st century. Precision Scheduled Railroading (PSR) slashed crews, cut inspection times, lengthened trains to record-breaking lengths, closed yards and destroyed redundancy. It was first started during the Clinton administration, but it spread under the Obama presidency.

Shoving movements became riskier because they are now conducted with fewer, exhausted workers under punitive attendance regimes, often in unfamiliar territory due to constant reassignments, and without needed maintenance or equipment.

Opposition to dangerous working conditions has been growing from below for years. In 2022, railroad workers rejected a government-backed contract maintaining PSR and similar systems, instead pressing for a national strike. The pro-company union bureaucracy acted as industrial police, delaying strike action for weeks until after the midterm elections to give Congress the chance to ban the strike before it even began.

Such is the real record of the Biden administration, the self-proclaimed “most pro-labor administration in history.”

To oppose this conspiracy and to fight to impose workers’ demands for a strike, railroaders formed the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The Committee played an active role in mobilizing opposition through large online meetings, informational pickets and statements.

The consequences became immediately visible in East Palestine, Ohio, the following January, when 38 cars derailed, including 11 tank cars loaded with toxic or flammable substances, and 2,000 residents were exposed to toxic residues.

The industrial slaughterhouse continues under Trump, who is eviscerating all regulations imposing even the slightest limits on the activities of corporations. Union Pacific CEO Jim Vena was a recent visitor to the White House, where he not only secured support for the railroad’s merger with Norfolk Southern but also advised Trump which cities to send troops into next.

Steve Crowe’s death is part of a broader and

accelerating crisis. Across the logistics sector, workers are dying under intense productivity pressure.

At the U.S. Postal Service’s distribution center in Allen Park, Michigan, Air Force veteran Nick Acker died after falling into a mail sort machine; his body was not found for hours. A week later, Russell Scruggs, Jr. died at a facility in Palmetto, Georgia.

Rank-and-file committees must be formed by workers to assert workers’ control of safety, investigating and exposing such preventable deaths and asserting the right to stop production and take other measures when a job is unsafe. Only by removing the profit motive from safety can these disasters be ended.

Such committees are already being built by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to link workers across crafts, terminals, companies, industries and national boundaries.



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