

Train derailment in Houston TX further expose the brutality of corporate railways

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Cleanup continued into the weekend after a large train derailment in northwest Houston, Texas on Friday morning. The accident caused major road closures, in a city whose infrastructure already suffers severe traffic challenges.

According to authorities, a Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC) train derailed on tracks owned by Union Pacific just before 9 a.m. on Old Katy Road near Hempstead Road. While the cause of the accident still remains unknown, officials said 11 rail cars carrying finished automobiles derailed along a major rail corridor that cuts through a busy industrial and commuter section of northwest Houston.

Videos circulating via local news and social media showed at least two train cars hanging over a ground-level overpass. There were no reported injuries and no hazardous materials involved in the derailment, according to police. Surrounding roadways were closed as crews worked to upright the cars and large trucks carrying heavy equipment were seen arriving at the scene. Local authorities also reported crews were dispatched to inspect the overpass's integrity.

Union Pacific, which operates the tracks where the incident took place, released a statement saying the company was notified about the incident but deflected responsibility to CPKC, prior to the conclusion of any official investigation, citing the fact that CPKC operated the train that derailed. For its part, CPKC released a brief statement only acknowledging the incident.

“A derailment on the Union Pacific tracks over Hempstead Road occurred Friday morning. 11 rail cars carrying finished vehicles on a CPKC train derailed,” the company said. “There were no injuries and no hazardous materials are involved. Crews have responded to the scene to begin work on removal of the

cars.”

CPKC was formed by the 2023 merger of the two historic railways, Canadian Pacific (CP) and Kansas City Southern (KCS). CPKC operates the first and only single-line, transnational rail network in North America. The company uses its massive 20,000-mile network to move goods to ports stretching across Canada, the US and down to Lázaro Cárdenas, México.

While responsibility remains to be determined, both companies are parties to the industry-wide degradation of American railroads and the safety of workers and communities.

Union Pacific has caused and been involved in numerous accidents tied to poorly maintained tracks, defective equipment and signal failures. This includes incidents like the 2004 Macdona, Texas incident, when a poorly maintained freight train collided with another, killing three and releasing a toxic chlorine gas cloud; and in 2017 when an ethanol train derailed and exploded in Graettinger, Iowa after collapsing a deteriorating timber railroad bridge Union Pacific failed to maintain.

CPKC was involved in at least two major derailments within the last 12 months. In November, 31 hopper cars and three tanker cars carrying grain and vegetable oil derailed near Highway 23 in Vulcan County, Alberta. In Wisconsin, a derailment of 24 cars occurred, the second incident in the same location in two years.

Just as Friday's accident in Houston was unfolding, CPKC was embroiled in contract negotiations with 300 Canadian workers represented by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Canadian Signals and Communications System Council No. 11.

After months of failed negotiations, workers overwhelmingly voted to initiate a strike on May 31, citing concerns over “extensive on-call obligations and

demanding schedules,” wages and safety. The union covers workers that perform safety-sensitive work involving the installation, maintenance, testing and repair of railway signalling and communications systems across the CPKC network.

In response, CPKC announced that it would launch “contingency plans”—hiring outside contract workers—to maintain operations as long as the strike continues.

Commenting on the derailment, a maintenance of way worker at CSX told the WSWS: “The hazards railroad workers face are the product of years of relentless pressure from management, including through the hated Precision Scheduled Railroading (PSR) implemented by all of the Class I railroads over the past decade. PSR was designed with one goal: Maximize profit by running the longest possible trains with the smallest possible crews and the least possible maintenance.

“The railroads are being bled white...CSX just announced another \$5 billion in stock buy backs while they cut jobs. Track inspector positions are being eliminated as a result of the [Federal Railway Administration] allowing a decrease in the weekly frequency of physical inspections. The FRA administrator was president of Pan-Am Railways, which CSX bought a few years ago. He was appointed by Trump.

He added: “Union Pacific donated to Trump’s White House ballroom project” in order to secure their merger with Norfolk Southern, which has been held up by regulators. “The Class 1 railroads need to be operated as a public utility, stripped from the greasy hands of Wall Street.”

The results have been catastrophic for workers. Workers under PSR face no set schedules, no guaranteed rest, no sick days and are on perpetual call. Workers on pool runs have no rest days at all. Many spend days in hotels between assignments, waiting for their next call, only to be called back before meaningful rest is possible.

Train lengths have been tripled, maintenance gangs that once had 20-25 workers now operate with 5-10, and the workforce has been slashed by over 45,000 workers, nearly 30 percent, across the major Class I carriers in recent years.

The dire consequences of this relentless cost-cutting

for the public were laid bare on February 3, 2023, when a Norfolk Southern train carrying toxic chemicals derailed in East Palestine, Ohio. The train—151 cars long, nearly two miles, and 18,000 tons—had a known mechanical problem two days before the crash, which workers say went undetected or ignored. Norfolk Southern had eliminated all of the specialized “electronic leaders” responsible for maintaining the hot-box detectors that could have caught the overheating wheel bearing that triggered the disaster.

Thousands of residents were evacuated. A “controlled burn” of vinyl chloride and other toxic chemicals sent a massive black plume over the surrounding communities. Residents who returned home reported rashes, headaches and severe respiratory illness. Norfolk Southern, which had allocated \$10 billion to stock buybacks, offered East Palestine a mere \$2 million.

The disaster was made possible by the government collusion at both the state and federal level. The rail industry spent over \$24 million lobbying politicians from both major parties in 2022 alone. Only months before the Palestine crash, in late 2022, the Biden administration and Congress intervened to block a national rail strike, in which safety would have been a key issue, and impose a contract workers had already rejected.

The answer to this situation cannot come from within these existing institutions. It must come from the workers themselves, organized independently of the bureaucracies that have repeatedly betrayed them. In 2022, workers formed the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, fighting to unite workers across craft lines, companies and national borders, and organize a movement for a national strike. The principle the committee advanced—that workers, not corporations or government agencies, must exercise democratic control over the conditions of their labor, including safety—is the only principle that can actually make the railroads safe.



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