

Norfolk Southern train derails in suburb of St. Louis, Missouri

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On the evening of September 20, a Norfolk Southern freight train derailed in Ferguson, Missouri, triggering widespread power outages and prompting an immediate emergency response from authorities. Norfolk Southern reported that about 20 train cars derailed in the 600 block of Ferguson Avenue near Paul Avenue.

The train was composed of three locomotives and 98 cars, including boxcars, auto carriers and gondola cars, with one car carrying hazardous materials which was not involved in the derailment. Approximately 240 customers remained without electricity shortly after midnight on September 21 in an area stretching from West Florissant and Ferguson avenues to South Florissant Road.

No injuries were reported. Authorities did not order an evacuation, but asked residents to avoid the area while emergency crews assessed the damage.

Jacqueline Nelson, who lives three houses away from Elizabeth and Ferguson where the train fell off the bridge, told local television station FOX 2, “What’s going on in this area. Why us?”

While the immediate cause of the derailment was still under investigation in the initial reports, corporate strategies aimed at boosting profits—such as running longer trains, reducing crew sizes, and cutting maintenance costs—have contributed to an environment in which derailments are a regular fact of life in America. Federal Railroad Administration data list 1,113 derailments in 2024 and 976 in 2025, roughly three per day.

Another train derailment occurred in the same area on September 25, 2020, nearly six years ago to the day. No injuries were reported in the previous train derailment, and no hazardous materials were involved.

Among the US derailments reported in the first two weeks of October:

- October 13: Five Norfolk Southern cars and a locomotive derailed in Morganton, North Carolina, injuring an engineer.

- October 8: Eleven Canadian National cars carrying sand derailed south of Pittsville, Wisconsin, temporarily blocking a highway crossing.

- October 5: An RJ Corman coal train derailed in Thurmond, West Virginia, damaging tracks and cutting off vehicle access.

- October 2: Five Conrail cars derailed in Morrisville, Pennsylvania, forcing road closures.

- October 1: Thirty-four Norfolk Southern cars derailed in Springville, Alabama, after a crossing collision, prompting a temporary evacuation.

- October 1: About 25 BNSF cars derailed north of Pleasantville, Iowa, closing a local road.

Norfolk Southern was also responsible for the East Palestine, Ohio derailment in February 2023. Three days later, a company contractor deliberately vented and burned vinyl chloride from five tank cars, an operation the National Transportation Safety Board later concluded was unnecessary. The derailment, chemical spills and fires contaminated the town and nearby waterways, killing thousands of fish and other aquatic animals.

While government agencies concluded that the environment was safe, local residents have reported health issues including rashes, neurological problems and respiratory difficulties.

The six Class I railroads (Norfolk Southern, CSX Transportation, Union Pacific, BNSF Railway, Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Kansas City) which dominate the industry, operate primarily to serve their shareholders’ interests rather than prioritizing safety or human needs. The financialization of railroads, where hedge funds and asset managers

prioritize buybacks and dividends, diverts capital from operations that could otherwise be used to enhance worker safety and prevent train derailments.

Policies such as “Precision Scheduled Railroading” and BNSF’s punitive “Hi Viz” attendance system are designed to exploit railroad crews to the limit, operating longer and heavier trains with fewer workers and reducing maintenance and inspection time.

The rail industry has been pushing to eliminate two-person crew requirements in favor of operating trains as long as two miles with only a single engineer, a move that would result in thousands of job losses and increase the risk of accidents.

Railroaders founded the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee in September 2022 to organize a national strike against the concessions proposed by then-President Biden’s Presidential Emergency Board, which the union apparatus was working to impose. Workers were fighting years of stagnant wages, exhausting schedules and punitive attendance policies that made it difficult to take time off even for illness. The committee sought to unite workers across the divisions maintained by the 12 rail unions and put the struggle under rank-and-file control.

The unions delayed strike action even after workers in four unions rejected the White House-backed agreement. In December 2022, Biden and Congress imposed the contract and banned a strike, with support from both capitalist parties. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez voted for the anti-strike bill. Bernie Sanders voted against final passage but consented to the expedited procedure that allowed it to pass before the strike deadline, while promoting a sick-leave amendment that was defeated. The union officials enforced the strike ban.

Beginning in August 2024, the union bureaucracies negotiated separate agreements at individual carriers, dividing workers by company and craft before national bargaining even opened. The deals set a pattern of 17.5 percent wage increases over five years, below the 24 percent in the contract imposed in 2022, while preventing workers from mounting a united fight.

At BNSF, SMART-TD backed changes eliminating brakeman and helper positions and establishing a ground-based “Road Utility Position,” laying the framework for further crew reductions. After workers rejected the changes, the union agreed to expedited

arbitration, which imposed the rejected terms virtually unchanged in December 2024. BNSF began eliminating positions that month.

SMART-TD has since endorsed Union Pacific’s proposed \$85 billion takeover of Norfolk Southern, announced in 2025. The merger would combine two of the six dominant carriers into a single transcontinental railroad. SMART-TD reversed its initial opposition after signing a job-protection agreement with management in September 2025, although the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen and the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees Division have opposed the merger. The promised protections leave management free to transfer workers and fail to protect jobs when lines are sold or leased to other operators.

Rail workers need to expand the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee to unite across carriers and crafts against job cuts and unsafe operations, independently of the union bureaucracy. This struggle requires a political break with both big-business parties and a socialist movement of the working class to place the railroads under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



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