

“A severely catastrophic situation”: BNSF uses scheduling tricks to prevent rail crews from using vacation time

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Railroad workers: tell us your experience with Hi Viz, PSR or other punitive work rules by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept confidential.

BNSF Railway has begun using its proprietary scheduling software to quietly black out entire weeks of vacation for train crews. The move is the latest tightening of brutal attendance policies across the industry, leaving railroaders at the beck and call of the carriers.

The practice was revealed in an exchange with the spouse of a veteran BNSF locomotive engineer in North Texas, who provided the *World Socialist Web Site* with evidence from the carrier’s Workforce Hub scheduling system. Because time off is bid months in advance, the blackout dates in the 2027 vacation calendar were discovered recently, as workers began submitting requests for the coming year.

Within the vacation scheduling module, sporadic Mondays are highlighted in red and carry the administrative label “BNSF Holiday,” with the submission fields disabled and a system-enforced notice indicating that vacation allocations are unavailable.

The significance of the designation lies in the structure of time-off bidding for train, yard and engine (TY&E) personnel. Under the collective bargaining agreements, the bulk of annual leave must be taken in discrete seven-day blocks running strictly from Monday through Sunday. Single-day vacation and personal leave days remain tightly restricted, leaving the full-week block as the primary mechanism by which operating employees can secure predictable, extended rest.

“If certain Mondays are blacked out, you essentially have an entire week blacked out by just blackballing a Monday,” the engineer’s spouse explained. “This is a severely catastrophic situation.”

She calculated that the pattern of blackouts—roughly every fifth week—renders some ten weeks of the year entirely unavailable for vacation bidding. “So what it’s looking like is 10 weeks out of the year no one can request any vacation weeks,” she said.

“So, what if you are getting married one of those weeks?” she asked. “You have to reschedule it, lose deposits or just not attend your own wedding. This has actually happened. Regularly.”

An end-run around the rank and file

The Monday blackouts represent a new front in a struggle that has been raging on the railroads for years. In January 2025, the WSWs reported that BNSF had unilaterally reduced time-off allocations—the number of workers permitted to lay off on any given day—by at least 25 percent, shrinking daily allocations from 20 to 15 at one terminal employing over

200 workers and down to a single slot per day at a terminal with only 40 workers.

That cut provoked an uproar. “The kerfuffle ensued,” the engineer’s spouse recalled. “Employees ripped the union, union ripped the carrier. They backpedaled and put it back like it was.”

But the retreat was temporary. The emergence of the 2027 Monday blackouts, she observed, appears to be an end-run around the workers’ pushback—a means of achieving the same constriction of time off without formally re-cutting the daily allocations. “It seems par for the course,” she said. “Cat and mouse. Employees fight to get what is fair then carrier pulls some other card.”

In separate 2024 and 2025 agreements with BLET officials, BNSF offered workers \$3,000 in addition to vacation pay to give up scheduled weeks, stipulating that the vacated slots would not be made available to other employees.

The effect will “result in not taking vacation and instead paying vacation out to employee at the end of the year,” she summarized.

The blackouts also strike directly at the seniority system that has long been the foundation of rail work rules. Locomotive engineers and conductors spend decades on erratic on-call extra boards, enduring severe sleep disruption in exchange for the expectation that accumulating tenure will eventually yield predictable summer rest. The software-enforced blackouts nullify that expectation.

“This happened to us, and we ended up after my husband having 20 years service we had to pull the kids out of school in late August for their summer vacation,” the engineer’s spouse said. “This is understandable for a rookie, but 2/3 of the way to retirement and you can’t get a few days off with your kids at all between May and August? Even people with 25-30 years were having the same issues.”

Hi-Viz and the demand for constant availability

The vacation blackouts are the latest layer in an attendance regime explicitly designed to keep a skeleton workforce in a state of near-total availability. The primary instrument is BNSF’s “Hi-Viz” points-based attendance policy, imposed unilaterally in 2022.

Under Hi-Viz, operating employees start with a bank of points that are deducted for any absence and replenished only through long stretches of unbroken on-call availability. The policy was tightened in April 2024, when the minimum deduction for a day off was raised and the accrual period lengthened, and again in January 2025, when the maximum bank was cut and the penalty for a single layoff raised to as many as 25

points—a sum requiring 125 consecutive days of availability to earn back.

The punishing schedules have driven experienced employees out of the industry. In April 2025, a BNSF worker in Wyoming told the WSWs that the company had cut paid extra-board positions and shifted workers into pools where they were paid only when called, reducing some paychecks by \$1,500 to \$2,000. New hires, he said, often left rather than endure Hi-Viz.

BNSF is wholly owned by Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway. It posted net earnings of \$5.99 billion in 2021, \$5.95 billion in 2022 and \$5.10 billion in 2023. These profits depend on keeping costs down while extracting as much work as possible from crews expected to remain available around the clock.

The same Wyoming worker described trains so long that radio contact between the conductor and locomotive could fail. He said safety defects remained uncorrected for months. "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 said of Hi-Viz. "[Y]ou've got train crews that are tired running trains with all sorts of nasty chemicals on them up and down the tracks."

Across the industry, the railroads have used other methods to carry out the same drive to cut labor costs and compel workers to remain available. At CSX, Precision Scheduled Railroading has been accompanied by reduced staffing, longer trains and increasingly restrictive attendance rules.

Recent lawsuits and court records show how these policies operate:

- In June 2026, CSX issued new restrictions on which medical appointments would qualify as excused absences, while threatening dismissal for allegedly suspicious absence patterns regardless of accumulated points. On July 29, a federal judge barred SMART-TD members from striking or taking other collective action over the dispute.

- CSX developed a computer algorithm to flag workers taking approved medical leave on weekends or near scheduled days off. During the 2017–18 holidays, a modified version targeted employees who had used FMLA leave on four of ten holidays or special occasions; 81 workers were suspended or fired. One worker was suspended after using leave to bring his father, who suffered from dementia, to Thanksgiving and Christmas family gatherings. The railroad also reviewed social media and at times hired private investigators to surveil workers.

- Norfolk Southern fired an engineer in 2021 after he missed work to evacuate his pregnant wife and family ahead of Hurricane Ida. An arbitration board overturned his dismissal in 2023 and ordered reinstatement with back pay; litigation over the award continued into November 2025.

The role of the union bureaucracy

The carriers have been able to impose this regime because the legal and political machinery of the state has been deployed to disarm the workers who oppose it.

When rail workers prepared to strike against Hi-Viz in early 2022, U.S. District Court Judge Mark Pittman granted BNSF a preliminary injunction under the Railway Labor Act, forcing the dispute into arbitration. Later that year, after workers in several unions rejected a White House-brokered contract and tens of thousands voted to strike, the Biden administration

appealed to Congress, which passed bipartisan legislation imposing the agreement and outlawing a national strike by roughly 115,000 freight railroaders.

The union bureaucracies played the decisive role in 2022, stalling for time after rank-and-file opposition to the agreement threatened a national strike, until Congress could organize its counteroffensive. In opposition, the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee organized meetings and pickets, including a meeting of 500 railroaders in September 2022 that demanded strike action and opposed any congressional imposition of a contract.

They have since worked to ram through a new round of sellout contracts, signing agreements craft by craft and carrier by carrier. In late 2024, SMART-TD officers signed a deal with BNSF that would have paved the way for one-person crews; train and engine service workers voted it down.

In 2025, SMART-TD and BLET officials negotiated and secured ratification of separate five-year national agreements covering BNSF conductors and engineers. In October, SMART-TD President Jeremy Ferguson called the new contract "a solid victory for our members," boasting that officials had "protected our work rules and crew consist agreements." In December, BLET President Mark Wallace declared that the engineers' national agreement "delivers real gains, protects our work rules, and avoids concessions." Both unions advertised faster vacation accrual: the SMART-TD agreement moved eligibility for the third, fourth and fifth vacation weeks forward by two years.

But earlier accrual is of little use if workers cannot schedule the weeks they have earned. As of October 20, neither union's national website had published a statement addressing the reported 2027 vacation blackouts or announced a public challenge to them.

The vacation blackouts raise once again the demands that drove railroaders into struggle in 2022: guaranteed time off, an end to punitive attendance policies and the right to strike. That struggle was suppressed through the intervention of the carriers, the union apparatus and Congress. Defending railroaders' livelihoods requires renewing the independent fight begun in 2022, which the new contracts have left unresolved.

The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, formed during that fight, calls for committees in every yard, terminal and shop to unite workers across crafts and carriers. The opposition that forced BNSF to restore time-off allocations in 2025 must be developed into an organized struggle to remove the vacation blackouts, abolish Hi-Viz and place control over schedules and working conditions in the hands of railroaders themselves.



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