

A response to the Teamsters' denunciation of the Canadian Pacific Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee

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Engineers, conductors and yard workers at Canadian Pacific Railways (CP Rail) established the CP Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee last month, following the Teamsters union's sabotaging of their struggle for wage and pension increases and an end to the railway giant's brutal scheduling and disciplinary regimes.

Bowing to pressure from the company and Canada's Liberal government, the Teamsters accepted a process whereby a government-appointed arbitrator will dictate CP Rail workers' terms of employment, and any worker job action is outlawed until the next contract expires years hence. Without any consultation let alone a vote, the Teamsters ordered the 3,000 workers it bargains for at CP Rail to return to work by Noon local time on March 22, some 36 hours after they had walked off the job.

Since its founding, the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee has become a pole of attraction for workers seeking to expose the terrible conditions they confront under a dictatorial working environment enforced by the combined efforts of CP management, complicit government regulators and the corporatist Teamsters and Unifor unions.

The Committee has also won support from workers and their relatives seeking to find out the truth about the deadly February 2019 derailment at Field, British Columbia, which claimed the lives of three railroaders. Pam Fraser, who gave an extensive interview to the WSWs on her family's struggle to uncover the truth about how her son, Dylan Paradis, was killed, noted that the Teamsters left her family to fight alone, saying that the union "fell by the wayside."

The Committee's determined struggle against the Teamsters' connivance with CP management and the Liberal government in robbing workers of their rights to strike and bargain collectively and in overseeing dangerous working conditions that produce tragedies like the Field derailment has evidently raised the hackles of the union bureaucracy. In recent days, several top bureaucrats have sent angry messages to the Committee's email address.

After the WSWs published material on the fatal Field derailment, the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee received

belligerent messages from union bureaucrats asserting that our criticisms of the unions are an attack on the workers they claim to represent. The article which provoked the most aggressive response was entitled "Teamsters to do nothing after inquiry documents Canadian Pacific's responsibility for fatal Field, B.C., derailment." The piece explained that the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) had reacted to the Transportation Safety Board's damning report on the Field accident, by declaring its full confidence that the pro-company rail regulator and the big business Liberal government—that is those responsible for overseeing CP's disastrous safety record—will now enforce tougher safety rules.

"When you refer to the union," wrote Steve Keene, an adviser to the TCRC with "four + decades of experience with worker advocacy," according to his LinkedIn profile, "surely you understand you are referring to all the workers. Your article is a despicable and reprehensible twisting of the union's position for your own political purposes. You should be ashamed."

Tom Doherty, Alberta provincial legislative chair of TCRC, weighed in with a rant of his own against the Committee. "You guys are crazy," he wrote. "I have no problem saying this. What you are saying is so disrespectful to the many members we have lost. You never even fact checked one of your statements. The only reason I am taking the time to respond is the absolute disgusting fact you're using the loss of three great people who lost their lives in a tragic incident to bolster your crazy hurtful rant. You are disrespecting their memories their families and us who are trying to make the persons responsible accountable. By your stupid rant you're attempting to change the narrative from a systematic issue in the railway industry into a personal position and claim absolute knowledge. What you are actually doing is harm to all of us."

If there is anything "disgusting" and "reprehensible" about this episode, it is the spectacle of well-paid union bureaucrats who have been hobnobbing with rail executives and government regulators for decades through the "labour relations" system denouncing workers who dare to criticize their record as "crazy" and disrespecting the memory of their

deceased colleagues. What they really cannot tolerate is the fact that the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee, unlike the corrupt Teamsters which functions like a company police force in the workplace, has created a democratic forum allowing rail workers to speak out freely about union complicity in imposing dangerous working conditions and wage a genuine struggle to improve them.

Keene's claim that by criticizing the union, the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee is attacking "all the workers" is a flat-out lie and deserves an extended response. The fact of the matter is that the TCRC, like all trade unions, no longer represents working people. Over the past four decades, the unions have been transformed into nothing more than appendages of corporate management and the state apparatus that promote nationalism to divide working people. They function as little more than labour syndicates, catering to the interests of a privileged layer of bureaucrats seeking well-paid posts on committees, pension boards and other corporatist institutions. What this middle class social layer fears above all, and this is reflected in the vitriol with which Keene and Doherty inveigh against the Committee, is that working people could reject the unions' nationalist and corporatist poison and form independent organizations to unify their struggles with workers internationally against the capitalist profit system.

For years, the TCRC has served as the henchmen of the rail operators' brutal enforcement of Precision Scheduled Railroading, which has produced hazards to workers and the public alike not seen since the slave labour conditions of the 19th century.

The unions have sabotaged every genuine struggle by workers, ramming through one concessions-laden contract after another.

So confident were investors that the TCRC's acceptance of binding arbitration at CP Rail would produce a corporate-friendly outcome that its share price jumped by 2.1 percent immediately after last month's arbitration-agreement was announced.

The reliance on a pro-corporate, state-appointed arbitrator to determine workers' "collective agreements" has become the standard operating procedure for the Teamsters. Eight out of the nine most recent labour disputes at CP have been "resolved" through arbitration, ensuring the profits-before-safety policy of the railways remains fully intact. And in virtually every case, the union itself sanctioned, if not welcomed, binding arbitration.

At Canada's other Class 1 freight railway, Canadian National (CN), the Teamsters union holds the same track record of imposing concessions and job cuts on workers and bowing before government back-to-work laws. In 2014, workers twice voted down union-endorsed agreements. Yet the TCRC scuttled a strike before it left the gate, after the Harper Conservative government threatened anti-strike legislation and a contract imposed by a Tory-appointed arbitrator.

In 2019, under pressure from the Trudeau-led Liberal government, the TCRC rushed to shut down a seven-day strike at CN. The union abandoned many of the workers' key demands around hazardous working conditions. The precipitous end to the strike relieved the Teamsters' government "partner" from having to impose back-to-work legislation, which would have damaged the Liberals' "progressive" image that the union bureaucracy has done so much to cultivate.

The Teamsters' record on Canada's railroads is the record of an organization that is bitterly hostile to rank-and-file workers and focused above all on defending the material interests of privileged bureaucrats by suppressing the class struggle. These interests are intimately tied to the profitability of the rail operators and corporate Canada more broadly, which explains why the unions are the leading purveyors of foul Canadian nationalism.

The unions' outright hostility to workers is an international phenomenon. In February, when 17,000 engineers and conductors at BNSF railroad in the US voted to strike over the new punitive "Hi Viz" attendance policy, a federal judge issued a strike-breaking injunction running roughshod over workers' democratic and even contractual rights. The attendance policy, unilaterally imposed by the company on February 1, is so brutal that at least 1,000 workers have resigned since its application. Yet, the unions involved in the struggle, the Sheet Metal Air Rail Transportation-Transportation Division (SMART-TD) union and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET)—a division of the Teamsters—enforced the anti-democratic injunction.

The CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee is fighting to put an end to the corporate domination of North America's railroads by fighting to unify Canadian, American and Mexican railroaders in a rebellion against the life-threatening conditions overseen by the tripartite alliance of corporate executives, union bureaucrats and government regulators.

The fact that this struggle has provoked outrage among top Teamsters bureaucrats should be a matter of pride to the Committee's members and proves that they are on the right track. The urgent task now is to expand the committee's influence among rail workers across the private railways and among broader sections of the working class, all of whom confront a gang-up of the bosses, union bureaucrats and government officials determined to ratchet up worker exploitation so as to boost corporate profits.

We appeal to all workers who wish to join our struggle to email the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee at cpworkersrfc@gmail.com.



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