

2 rail workers killed, 3 others injured in west Texas train derailment

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A Union Pacific train derailed in west Texas on December 18 after colliding with a tractor-trailer at a rail crossing, killing two crewmen and injuring three others. The incident took place in the middle of the town of Pecos, a town of 13,000 located west of Midland and 200 miles east of El Paso.

The derailment occurred near Oak and Dot Stafford streets in the vicinity of the Pecos Chamber of Commerce, which was severely damaged when several derailed rail cars struck the building. Pecos Police Chief Lisa Tarango told the *Austin American-Statesman* that three members of the public suffered minor injuries, two of whom were inside the building when it was struck.

A spokesperson for Omaha-based Union Pacific identified the two workers who died as engineer Clay Burt, 63, who had worked for the railroad since 1998, and conductor Philip Araujo, 47, employed since 2012.

One rail worker died at the scene of the derailment, with the other succumbing to serious injuries after being transported to a hospital in Odessa.

The Chamber of Commerce building sustained such significant damage that authorities closed the surrounding area, including several businesses. Residents were asked to stay clear of the area, and detours were set up.

Two of the derailed cars were carrying hazardous materials, one with lithium-ion batteries and the other with vehicle airbags. Additionally, the derailment caused a diesel fuel spill.

According to the *Austin American-Statesman*, Pecos City Manager Charles Lino, attempting to calm the public, claimed the materials were safely contained and under the control of Union Pacific. Lino stated that a preliminary investigation had been conducted immediately after the crash and declared there were no

risks to public safety.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), the government agency tasked with investigating civil transportation accidents, stated that it had sent a team to the crash site, with the declaration that it would not speculate on the cause of the crash during the early phase of its investigation.

Lino added that in addition to the NTSB, a “myriad” of government agencies, including the Federal Railway Administration and the Texas Department of Transportation, were set to arrive on the scene of the derailment over the next several days to aid in the investigation of the disaster.

A number of issues arise. First of all, none of the official claims that hazardous materials have been contained are true remains to be confirmed. Similar claims by both government and railroad officials from Norfolk Southern were issued in the aftermath of the East Palestine, Ohio, disaster in February of 2023, before residents began reporting widespread symptoms of exposure to toxic substances released by the massive derailment and subsequent “controlled release and burn” of overturned chemical tankers. This decision, later found to be completely unnecessary, released 1.1 million pounds of vinyl chloride into the atmosphere for several days, in which the smoldering toxic concoction traveled through the air over several states. Norfolk-Southern was ordered to pay a paltry \$310 million fine, along with a \$600 million settlement to residents of East Palestine, an amount dwarfed by the railroad giant’s 2023 profits of \$8 billion.

Even accepting the claims by authorities in Texas as true, it is clear that an even worse catastrophe could have been possible, especially given that lithium fires are extremely difficult to extinguish. This raises the question of why such materials were being transported

in the middle of a town in the first place.

Whatever the outcome of the investigation of the derailment in Pecos, it will certainly not lead to the institution of greater safety measures for the nation's railways. Railroad management has been allowed to operate in a reckless fashion which makes such disasters inevitable, with no meaningful oversight by the government.

Derailments occur on average three times a day in the United States, following decades of deregulation, mergers and acquisition and cost-cutting by the railroads' Wall Street owners. Last December, Union Pacific laid off 1,300 maintenance workers, reducing its workforce to less than half of what it was in 2016.

In August, Union Pacific unilaterally revoked a new time-off policy for rail crews, citing "labor shortages" caused by pre-existing massive overwork forcing railroaders out of the industry altogether. Until 2023, railroaders across all of the Class I carriers had no guaranteed paid time-off at all. Brutal scheduling, including 80-hour workweeks or more in many cases, creates dangerous conditions in which exhausted crews are more likely to make mistakes.

For years, the railroads have been pushing to reduce the size of rail crews from two—itsself a fraction of crew sizes in previous generations—to one using "Positive Train Control" and other new tracking and automated technologies. The elimination of train-based conductors, leaving engineers to operate trains by themselves, would compound existing safety problems.

A significant share of responsibility for the accident also lies with the bureaucrats who control the rail unions, including the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) and SMART-TD. Working with management and corporate politicians, they have deliberately sabotaged the struggle by rank-and-file workers against dangerous conditions which make such disasters inevitable.

In 2022, after workers rejected a contract brokered by the White House and were prepared to conduct a national strike, union officials deliberately stalled for time until Congress was able to pass a law imposing the contract. A major element in that struggle was the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, formed to organize a rebellion against the union sellouts and mobilize workers independently of the bureaucrats and politicians from both parties.

Now, the unions are attempting to head off another rank-and-file rebellion by forcing workers to accept separate contracts outside of the national bargaining framework. SMART-TD tried to push a contract at BNSF which would have paved the way for one-man crews.

In response to the Pecos derailment, the BLET issued a statement declaring: "Our hearts go out to the families of the conductor and engineer who lost their lives" while adding that this "should be a wake-up call for legislators" to improve railroad safety across the United States.

SMART-TD posted a similar statement on its website: "Rail workers do vital work, often at great personal risk. As we mourn this loss, we also renew our commitment to fighting for stronger safety measures that will serve to better protect all those who work on and live near the rails."

This is absurd. Far from being a "wake-up call," Congress and the entire political establishment responded to the East Palestine disaster by covering it up and protecting Norfolk Southern, not residents. The only time in recent memory when Congress "woke up" in relation to the railroads was when it moved to ban workers from striking two years ago.

In directing attention to empty appeals Congress, union officials are attempting to justify their own corrupt relations with corporate politicians and to tie workers' hands.

A genuine struggle for safety on the railroads requires workers taking matters into their own hands. Uniting with their coworkers across the railroads, they must insist that they have the right to take actions which they deem necessary to protect the safety of themselves and the public, and to take power over safety decisions out of the hands of Wall Street investors and into the hands of workers themselves.



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