

“We are just numbers around here”: BNSF railroaders denounce “slave labor” attendance policy

Omri Wolfe
31 January 2025

Rail workers at BNSF or other carriers, has your attendance policy recently changed? Share your experience by filling out the form below.

BNSF, one of the six Class I freight rail carriers, has unilaterally amended its already hated attendance policy to further dictate the schedules of train operators, incentivize overwork, and more easily terminate workers.

The “Hi Viz” attendance policy is a point-based system, where workers accrue points through perfect attendance that they can “spend” on time off. If their points drop below zero, they are liable to be fired. The policy itself was unilaterally implemented by BNSF, and a federal judge later protected the company by blocking a strike in early 2022.

Later that year, workers rejected a national contract, paving the way for strike action at all Class I carriers. But the union bureaucrats held workers back until the strike was preemptively banned by Congress. Opposition was organized by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which urged workers to take matters into their own hands.

Now, the bureaucrats are working to impose a new round of sellout contracts. Recently, the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employes forced the ratification of a new contract at CSX after workers rejected it in a first vote. At BNSF, the unions have not lifted a finger to fight the new attendance policy changes.

Under the changes to the “Hi Viz” policy, disseminated haphazardly over the month of January, the maximum points that can be accrued were reduced from 37 (with bonuses) to 30, and to accrue additional points, train crew must work or be on-call for 25 straight days to earn a mere five points. Since April, locomotive engineers and conductors had to work 18 straight days to earn four points, and prior to that, only 14 continuous days.

The deductions for “laying off”—exchanging points for paid time off—have skyrocketed. A year ago, laying off on a regular weekday deducted two points. With the latest changes, the minimum penalty for laying off is 10 points. These increase to 25 points if a worker is absent on short notice on a “high impact day”—for instance, if they have a family emergency.

That is, it takes 125 consecutive days to accrue 25 points, which can be wiped out for a single personal day.

Laying off for any reason “resets” the accrual period, which further disincentivizes using paid time off. BNSF has made it so difficult to take days off that, they claim, workers had an excess of “unused” days at the end of 2024. They used this justification to reduce layoff allocations by at least 25 percent—that is, the total number of workers that can lay off at a time.

One BNSF worker posted on social media: “This is pretty sickening. The fact that our attendance policy isn’t contractual is mind blowing. ... Our union is a joke.”

“This used to be a coveted job,” as one railroader put it, but many now find it unbearable. “Nothing but a slave labor policy,” one put it bluntly. “[BNSF’s] plan is either quit or get fired,” another wrote, pointing out that the carriers have implemented *worsening* policies, even as over 30 percent of rail workers left the industry over the last decade.

Many workers hold the view that the railroad is aiming to shrink its workforce by forcing workers to quit, not only to bolster profits but to pave the way for one-man train crews, long a goal of all the major railroads. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has extensively reported, the SMART-TD conductors’

union agreed with BNSF to introduce one-man crews last year, but workers rejected this TA by wide margins.

One worker outlined the lobbying effort underway: “[The carriers] do everything in their power to make it a worse and worse place to work, so more people will quit, they can fire more people for availability, and then they can go cry to our corrupt government that they don’t have enough people to run trains and if they don’t pass legislation to implement one-man crews the whole infrastructure will implode.”

One railroader from the Midwest wrote in to the WSWWS:

The company’s attendance policy ... has created mass tension within the workplace. This policy will only hit employees that work hard and do not have FMLA to buffer days off. If you were to call in sick, it would take

50 days to recuperate the points used for that day. 30 percent of the workforce left in 2022 during Hi-Viz, and the company has been trying to fill positions since. Are they willing to lose another 30 percent? What happened to providing incentives for employees to work harder? Is mass punishment the answer?

Another pointed out the discrepancy between the promises sold to workers about Hi-Viz versus the reality: “How is this not worthy of a strike? They wanted Hi-viz for ‘quality of life improvements’ ... now there’s no life left.” Many workers echoed the desire to organize a wildcat strike, since legal work stoppages are extremely constrained by the anti-democratic Railway Labor Act.

Another wrote in with an extended description of the decline of working conditions:

[I am] contemplating resignation over draconian attendance policy. I loyally complied with attendance policies from the beginning of my career and continue to [be] floored by the consistent and methodical erosion of our ability to have any semblance of a life outside of the workplace. Many of us participate in community, family, and professional practices outside of the rail workplace. This unrelenting assault on our ability to maintain any activity or be accountable for any responsibility outside of the railroads is a demanding and unreasonable expectation.

The rail continues to chip away at our freedom and personal ambitions. The railroad bean counters can’t possibly understand how their corporate models are going to cost them dearly when the bottom line is reached. Our equipment standards of maintenance are significantly declining. It use to be the exception to find defects on our locomotives, now it is the standard and we are forced to operate unsafe locomotives with defective equipment. We are told by maintenance employees they are short handed and pass on minor repairs as they are directed to keep the equipment in service. Minor defects develop into major defects and substandard becomes the standard.

... Our trains are three miles long and have to creep along at slower speeds to keep them together. More trains fail to make it from one terminal to another without the need for a relief crew than ever before. Our third party taxi crew transport companies hire substandard employees who often put our crews in jeopardy. If an anonymous survey were sent out to rail employees regarding these regular incidents, a shocking revelation would result. Most incidents go unreported for fear of retaliation or because no actions were taken

in prior reporting.

...Our union has proven to [be] ineffective, stammered by congress and company officials and policies handed down from on high. Our attendance policies prevent us from attending union meetings and we can not vote here unless we are present. There is no consideration for the vast majority of us who are ill-informed of current business and disenfranchised by our union’s lack of willingness to communicate with us or allow us to vote remotely. They operate as if modern tech or even news letters aren’t an option. Current union officers who have a pass to attend their own meetings continue to nominate one another for roles and foster unhealthy long-term buddy relationships with company officials.

...New employees can’t understand the erosion of morale or appreciate how well this system operated in years past. I believe the company welcomes our exit to usher in new employees who accept current standards as status quo. It is hard to witness. Safety and mental health are suffering for this company’s greedy policies. We are just numbers around here. It’s all about the numbers and the budget cuts.

One rail worker responded to the illusions he hears about the two big-business parties: “‘Trump is in office and is on the unions’ side this time’—you’re delusional. ‘Democrats are pro union and will side with us’—you’re delusional.”

Railroaders serious about ending the dictatorship of the carriers should join the Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee by filling out the form below. The RWRFC played the leading role in the struggle against the contracts two years ago and is the only organization speaking the truth to workers because it is democratically run exclusively by workers themselves.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact