

Our Lives are at Risk When Stockholders Demand to Get Rich Quick

In my commentary in the Summer 2017 issue of *The Highball*, I summed up the sordid story of CP's effortless slaughter of the operating crafts that escalated under the reign of former CEO Hunter Harrison (HH), and continues under his handpicked successor, while HH has moved on to bigger and better worlds to conquer at CSX. In the last few months there have been numerous "What the @#\$\$ is going on at CSX?" themed articles in various industry trade publications and the mainstream press. While most of these articles are predominantly from the perspective of various business interests, shippers, investors and so forth, on a few occasions the workers' experiences and perspective have found their way into this discussion. As I read about the resulting chaos from HH's scorched earth, gut-the-railroad-to-remodel-it on-the-fly approach, not only have I seen this movie before, but I have lived it and experienced it from my vantage point at the Canadian Pacific (CP) Bensenville, IL. yard.

One story in particular was a real kick-in-the-gut and got my blood boiling. As this goes to press, I haven't been able to assemble all the facts, but recently there was a serious injury to a conductor at the CSX Radnor Yard in Nashville. According to an article in Trains.com/newswire, the SMART-TD wrote a letter to CSX management alleging that recent changes to the switching operations were a significant contributing factor. Radnor had been a major hump yard until HH shut that down, waved his magic wand, and instantly transformed the hump into a flat switching operation. For those of you unfamiliar with this terminology, I'll attempt a brief explanation so that the potential hazards posed for workers and the surrounding communities can be better understood. The basic operation of a standard rail yard can be summed up as: 1) switching out inbound trains in order to 2) assemble new outbound trains. The cars from an inbound train are distributed to various tracks in a classification yard, according to their ultimate destination. Based upon what is headed where, various tracks are then coupled up by a pullback job, doubled, tripled, quadrupled, etc. ultimately constituting an outbound train for departure. Switching out cars per a hump operation involves shoving a train up an incline at a slow, constant speed. The cars are separated at the top of the "hump" - usually by a human "pin puller", walking with the pace of the shove - to then roll freely downhill into the various classification tracks. In this modern era, the switches for each destination track are usually thrown automatically by a computer. Various mechanical retarders adjust the speed of the cars as they descend, so the resulting impact of the free rolling freight cars does not exceed the industry standard of 4 mph - in theory. Flat switching requires a switchperson to 1) manually throw the various switches, then 2) direct the engine to start an accelerated shove, pull the pin that will separate the cars from those coupled to the engine when it is then directed to stop. Most hump and flat switching engineers have been replaced by switchpersons with a remote control pack.

Painting a picture of what went down in Bensenville may provide some insight into possible contributing factors in this recent incident at Radnor. HH's disdain for hump operations - due to the overhead and maintenance required for a smooth, reasonably safe operation - is well documented. So one of the first things he did at CP was to kill the hump operation, turning Bensenville into a big flat switching operation. One problem is

that uniquely specific logistics are required for either respective mode of switching. Critical factors such as the grade of the switching lead, the configuration of the switches and the grade of the classification yard, to name but a few, can make the difference between a half-way smooth and safe operation vs. a catastrophe waiting to happen. When he took out the retarders and started flat switching in the hump yard, cars were flying down the lead, into the tracks with impacts of at least 10-15 mph at times. This resulted in derailments, wreaked havoc on shiftable loads, and cars sometimes ran out the other end into the side of pullback jobs. To compensate for killing the hump, we started flat switching in what had been a receiving/departure yard with fairly long tracks. This gave the free rolling cars a longer distance in which to pick up speed, resulting in the same high impact and run-out issues. If this wasn't insane enough, HH implemented flat switching from *both* ends of each yard. So at that end not designed for flat switching, we were switching uphill, flagrantly defying the laws of gravity and physics. In the union's letter to CSX, they cited the inherent hazards of attempting to switch uphill as one of the contributing factors to this incident at Radnor.

The railroad industry poses numerous hazards to the workforce and surrounding communities on a good day, under the most ideal and favorable conditions. A one second lapse in judgement or loss of situational awareness by a conductor or engineer, that is exacerbated by whip-cracking speed-up, can result in a serious incident that poses injury and/or death to workers and surrounding communities. Deferred maintenance to the rolling stock and infrastructure, due to reduced staffing and speed-up in the mechanical crafts, can yield the same deadly consequences. Factor in fatigue from being overworked, along with the now standard two-mile long trains and the probable odds for tragic incidents continues to multiply exponentially. In my last few years at CP, there were numerous close calls that could easily have resulted in a serious injury, fatality or worse. I had never witnessed as much metal on metal carnage in all of my previous years of railroading combined. When a Godless heathen (so I've been called) is reduced to desperately praying that an ammonia, chlorine or LP gas car doesn't get sliced open on my watch, that's not a pretty picture. All rail bosses are evil, greedy and ruthless. Now HH simply has raised the bar for them to emulate. In the face of this degenerating scenario, do we rely on the FRA and the union leadership as presently constituted to defend us? The reality on the ground says all that needs to be said about counting on them for assistance. Only an educated, mobilized, organized, energized rank & file, determined to fight for our safety and dignity, in alliance with our natural allies in the community, can effectively challenge Hunter Harrison and all of his kindred spirits throughout the industrial and political landscape.

Mark Burrows has served as Organizer and Co-Chair for Railroad Workers United. He recently retired after hiring out in 1974, working as an engineer for a combined total of 37 years for Chicago North Western and the Soo Line/Canadian Pacific in Chicago, Illinois. He continues to be an active member of RWU .

