How Many Rails Need to be Sacrificed at the Altar of Capitalism?

As I began to process the few facts that came out in the immediate aftermath of the derailment of CP, Train #301, that killed three workers (see lead story on Page 1), that question came to mind, and since then has burned its way into my consciousness. What is it going to take before the rank & file rise up to demand ENOUGH IS ENOUGH? For the evil, immoral CEO’s and their faithful, Kool-aid drinking lackeys down the chain-of-command, the occasional, but too frequent, tragic incident is no more than an inconvenient cost of doing business. The front-line, low-level managers put on a sad, empathetic face and conjure up a somber tone to express their condolences to the grieving families, while the CEO’s accountant double-checks to ensure they’re current on their liability insurance premiums. While they’re at it, they just might up the coverage a bit, just to play it safe. That’s who they are and what they’re about. There’s no revelation there. All that’s a given.

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What does mystify, and outright angers me, is that there are far too many rails who have allowed themselves to be beaten into submission, to rationalize that fatalities and crippling injuries simply come with the territory of working on the railroad. Are those “fighting words”? If so, then prove me wrong, PLEASE! In lieu of that, until there are mass protests and demonstrations, demanding that safety not be compromised one bloody iota, just so some stockholder can take luxury vacations, live in a luxurious home, drive luxury cars, attend sporting events in the comfort of luxury suites, send his/her kids to elite colleges etc., I stand by that assertion. Last I heard, the unions’ stated mission, if not reason for existence, is to “negotiate” for improved quality of life—by ANY means necessary — needed to replace the concept of “negotiate” a long time ago. Come on, how are the existing terms-of-engagement working out for rails?

At CP and CSX, where the oxymoron titled business model of Precision Scheduled Railroading (PSR) has been firmly implemented, the investors who buy in are certainly making a “killing”. So the other carriers are forced to implement their own versions, since in order to compete, they need to “keep up with the Jones’s”. So PSR is now spreading thru the industry like a cancer on steroids metastasizing.

For that reason, I want to analyze this specific incident, because it serves as a classic “poster child” for how the carriers’ profits, enhanced by PSR, are dripping in railroad workers’ blood. It needs to be noted that whenever there is an incident, it’s very difficult to assemble the facts. Workers are prohibited from speaking to the media and/or publicly, per unconstitutional, “...against the rules to disclose company business and/or disparage the company...” BS. The carriers can’t allow any relevant facts to slip out, while they’re getting their “ducks” lined up and story straight, to minimize any perception of culpability and liability. The standard refrain from the carriers, unions, and any opportunist politicians if so moved, generally goes something like: The applicable government agency (Canada: Transportation Safety Board - US: National Transportation Safety Board) will conduct a thorough investigation. When we have more information, we’ll get back to you.” In other words, “Nothing to see here folks, so please move along”, as they clean up the wreckage and haul off the body bags. “Don’t worry your pretty little head about it, we got this.” A year or two later, the findings and conclusions will be quietly buried in the website archives.

In spite of not having all the facts, the bits-and-pieces that we do have, augmented with some plausible, educated speculation, a damning indictment can still be made. Even without the “bloody shirt, smoking gun, DNA evidence and signed confession”, the circumstantial evidence is compelling, nonetheless.

Fact: The train was in emergency. I’ve heard, but can’t verify, that the engineer was struggling to stop for the crew change.

Fact: The conventional train brake air system is increasingly challenged in arctic conditions. The moisture in the air tends to freeze. The synchronized, mechanical interaction of the various moving parts is challenged. The rubber gaskets sealing the train line at every hose coupling become rigid, causing enough leakage to potentially wreak havoc on a mile-plus long trainline.

Fact: The ambient temperature was 15-20 below 0 Fahrenheit. An article in the Calgary Herald, Feb. 6, stated that the crew had reported struggling to maintain the desired speed. DUH!

Fact: The more cars/tonnage, the longer the train, the more variables in play, meaning greater potential for problems. Arctic conditions on mountain grade increase that potential exponentially.

Fact: PSR seeks to obliterate the “inconvenience” of designated divisions with regular crew-change points. Crews get qualified beyond their previous territories and are instructed to, “Get on and take it as far as you can”. Increase the train length to over 2 miles long, and voila – a few less crews are needed to get the freight from point A to B. Lower operating ratio = higher profit.

What the Hell do I know? I’m not some degreed, overpaid, bean-counting, pencil-pushing (or computer programming) operations manager, who quite possibly has never worked a day on the ground in his/her life. That said, as a veteran rail, here’s what I DO know: In order to recharge the air brake system after an emergency application, the train brakes need to be in a state of release. During this process, since the engine brakes alone would not be sufficient to hold the tonnage of a unit grain train on a steep mountain grade, handbrakes would be essential. Had CP simply reduced the cars/train length/tonnage by 50%, to account for the challenges of a unit grain train, in arctic conditions, thru the Canadian Rockies, both crews would at least have had a fighting chance to get the train over the road safely.

Fact: No worker should EVER have to sacrifice his/her life.

Fact: Only an educated, organized, mobilized, rank & file, empowered and determined to fight by any means necessary, can bring an end to this criminal carnage.

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