Six Rail Workers Killed Within Weeks of Each Other Across North America

The rail industry is very fond of citing its statistics that “prove” a decline in rail workers injuries. The carriers like to promote the idea that it is their enlightened policies, procedures and operations that are solely responsible for this supposed decline. But other factors are often at play that may be responsible for any decline in injuries. For example, with 20,000 fewer railroad workers on the property in the U.S. alone this year, one might naturally expect at minimum a proportionate decline in rail accidents and injuries. In addition, as the rail industry, technology, industrial materials, communications and other aspects of industrial society develop and improve, one would expect these changes to translate into a safer rail workplace environment.

When it comes to fatalities however, the rail industry does not crow so loud. They are of course a little harder to cover up, and workers fearing discipline cannot hide or cover them up. As such, the number of fatalities on the railroad stubbornly refuses to decline in the past decade in both the U.S. and Canada. While the numbers are still being crunched, RWU has documented 22 rail worker fatalities in 2019. See the RWU website. (NOTE: our numbers may not match the rail industry’s nor those of government oversight agencies since RWU considers contract workers who do railroad work to be railroad workers period, regardless of what boss they may be collecting a paycheck from).

A “safe” rail system could not experience what occurred in five brutal weeks in late 2019. Coming on the heels of Amtrak CEO Richard Anderson crowing about the great safety record achieved by the new safety program at that carrier, Amtrak would lose three workers in the space of three weeks in three separate incidents. All told, six union brothers would be killed in those five weeks. It goes without saying that neither Anderson nor other rail CEO’s claimed that their amazing “safety” programs were responsible for these (or the other) losses in 2019.

Starting with the death of Chicago Amtrak machinist Christopher Blaess on November 9th, a total of six railroaders would die on the job in the next five weeks. Amtrak BMWED member Juan Diaz (photo, far left), would be killed 4 days later, followed by CP engineer Kirk Charles McLean (photo, center) killed in Port Coquitlam, BC December 2nd. Conductor Chris Seidl on the Wichita Terminal RR in Wichita, KS was killed the very next day. Yet a third Amtrak worker Jarrett Erhart would die during this period, in The Bronx, NY on December 5th. Finally on December 14th, CSX conductor Curtis C. McConihay (photo, right) was killed in a switching derailment near Parkersburg, WV.