2019: The Year of the Derailment

As railroaders, we are used to hearing of derailments. Many of us may have been involved in a minor or even a major derailment over the course of our working lives. This is the nature of the transportation industry. Heavy objects in motion sometimes do not perform the way we expect them to. These things happen.

But by summer of 2019, it had become apparent to those who work in this industry that something was amiss. For those paying attention, it seemed like hardly a week went by that we learned of yet another derailment. Yes, of course many were minor, slow-speed derailments and yard mishaps. But there were an inordinate number of high speed mainline wrecks of all sorts, wrecks that - while thankfully sparing the lives of both crew members and trackside community residents - were often dramatic and cataclysmic, many resulting in dozens of cars spilled, locomotives wrecked, fires and explosions, toxic chemical releases, dramatic rescues and citizen evacuations.

Railroad Workers United has begun an effort to track the number of derailments, and has compiled a comprehensive listing of them on our website Home Page. In early January, the list was emailed to our members, supporters and public officials. While more thorough and complete research is necessary, it seems to us that is no coincidence that the same year that PSR took hold on most all Class One railroads across North America, that a surprising number of major mainline derailments and worker fatalities (see article above) would occur. While it might be impossible to prove the connection, draw your own conclusions.

While most of the year’s derailments did not result in rail worker fatalities, a number of train crews were injured and hospitalized. Such was not the fate of the year’s first major derailment of the year, when three CP crew members lost their lives in a runaway train wreck in the Canadian Rockies on February 4th, and CSX conductor was killed in a West Virginia derailment on December 16th. Miraculously, the crew was saved from drowning in this derailment - on the final day of 2019 - near the Montana-Idaho border (above photo), when a BNSF train derailed, plunging into the icy waters of the Kootenai River.