

Opinion & Commentary

Dan Johnson, Friend and Co-Worker - Killed on the Job

On June, 23, 2018, at approximately 2:30 AM, Dan Johnson, 45, a veteran conductor with 15 years service, member of SMART-TD Local #1433, CP Rail, Bensenville, IL terminal, was killed in a horrific switching accident. He leaves behind his wife and four daughters, all of whom his world revolved around. He was a jovial character (as long as you didn't cross him) and we shared a mutual appreciation for great music, various cuisines, craft brews and "Star Wars", though HE was a card-carrying "geek".

In the previous issue of *The Highball*, Summer 2018, the article, "Despite Industry Claims of a Safer Railroad, Workers Continue to Die", pointed out that the average number of on-the-job fatalities in the U.S. and Canada combined, has been in the 15-20 range over the last decade or so. This is in spite of the fact that the overall member of employees tends to decline in relation to job-slashing advances in productivity and that contract workers, doing work formerly done by "officially certified" rails, are not even included in these morbid statistics. According to RWU's count, which may not be 100% up-to-date as this issue goes to press, the tally so far for 2018 is 14, right on schedule.

Most, if not all, rails are made aware of the potential hazards of the job at the very beginning of the interview/orientation process, if friends or family haven't already enlightened us. Before we have invested hardly any time and effort into pursuing employment in the railroad industry, we all make a very deliberate, conscious decision to take a chance. We try to convince ourselves that, "I'll be extra careful to make certain that I *never* have a serious injury, or worse." Though well intentioned, that thought process is ultimately delusional, as there are simply too many variables and factors that we don't have enough control over within the existing terms of engagement.

Forgive me for indulging in a little layperson, self-psychoanalysis here: I think it's fair to at least speculate that when we hear about the latest fallen rail, while we may feel a certain anger, sadness and righteous indignation, unless a close friend, family member and/or co-worker is involved, these justifiable emotions manage to find their way to a safe place. We feel for and empathize with his/her family, friends and co-workers, but a built-in coping mechanism enables us to feel sufficiently detached. Otherwise we might get angry enough to "storm the barricades". Yeah, well THIS time it's different. Now it's PERSONAL!

Dan and I often worked together on the afternoon intermodal switcher and the last remaining industry switcher, the job he was working that morning. He was an exemplary professional, methodical and safe. His old school work ethic compelled him to get the job done, especially the time-sensitive tasks, regardless of how he may have felt towards management.

Newlyweds Bakery is in downtown Chicago, right on the main line. It's the last stop after servicing local industries near the yard, about 15 miles west. Due to the cramped logistics, it could require a lot of switching just to pull and spot a handful of cars. So we'd gather up the cars we needed and switch between the main and an adjacent siding. Of course there are limited windows between 2-mile long freight trains, as well as time-sensitive Metra and Amtrak passenger trains. If the Amtrak was on time, it would clear around midnight, leaving us only a couple of hours to "get er' done", and make it back to Bensenville. We always preferred to avoid Hours-of-Service situations, in order to minimize the "heat" on the job.

Shortly after the arbitrator imposed Hunter Harrison's "Hourly"



Dan with his family, from left to right: Adrianna 9, Diana holding newborn Gianna (now 9 months), Natalia 6, and Anabella 4.

Rate Agreement" on the conductors, around May, 2017, the bosses pulled the brake-person off the job, slashing it to engineer and conductor only. For the younger rails, it merits pointing out that not that long ago, this type of switching was performed by three ground personnel. The Local Chairman pleaded with the Superintendent, who many of us had once mentored when he began his "illustrious" career as a conductor, to put the brake-person back on the job. The LC tried in vain to convey his valid concerns, that safety would be compromised by too much work overload, combined with the potential hazards of working alone in a remote environment. He was told cold-bloodedly that the brake-person could not be "justified" - end of discussion.

This is what "profits over safety" looks like. Working on the railroad is death-defying on a GOOD day, under the BEST of circumstances. As speed-up (increased production from fewer workers) intensifies, the probability of future incidents increases exponentially. Prior to the HH "Precision Railroad" era, there had not been a fatality at CP for many years. In the last few years there have been 5 fatalities, and a few injuries involving amputations. The company line is ALWAYS, "Human error - blame the worker." Many workers know that these tragedies are the direct result, cause-and-effect of CP's relentless speed-up. Those of us who knew Dan, know what happened and why. At the July meeting of the Chicago All Rail Craft Coalition, I gave a brief presentation about this tragedy, underscoring the need for unity and solidarity, to more effectively fight for a safer work environment. I was profoundly moved when one of the NS Maintenance-of-Way workers spontaneously called for a moment of silence to honor Brother Dan. At the July union meeting of Local 1433, we spent a few hours collectively processing this tragedy. The obscene "salaries" of today's "robber rail barons" (What the Hell do they do to "earn" them?) and the profits stuffing the shareholders' wallets are dripping with the blood of our fallen brothers and sisters. NO worker, in ANY industry, should EVER have to die, simply trying to provide for his/her self and loved ones.

Mark Burrows has served as Organizer and Co-Chair for RWU. He recently retired after hiring out in 1974, working as an engineer for a combined total of 37 years for the C&NW and the Soo Line/CP Rail in Chicago, Illinois. He was SMART-TD 1433's Delegate for the 2011 & 2014 International Conventions and continues to be an active member of RWU.

