

**1. Can you describe your project?**

I am analyzing the current challenges and issues with the private control of the rail network in the United States and looking at the aspects of safety, workers' lives, and the deteriorated quality of both freight shipments and experience for passenger rail. Then, I am analyzing foreign systems and generic models for structuring a rail system and making a determination about what works best for the United States. I'm doing this in conjunction with Railroad Workers United, a few unions, environmental advocacy groups, and others interested in improving the rail system. My ultimate hope is that this white paper will be turned into both legislation and backing for a public rail campaign, which may culminate in a launch in April at Labor Notes.

**2. What got you interested in the topic of your research?**

The answer I always give is I was always a train kid and I came back to that in college, being in the Northeast Corridor, being around more passenger rail, and going by freight yards. What specifically got me onto this topic was all the discussions around a potential rail strike in November/December of 2022, which then got blocked by Congress but whose contract agreement didn't really resolve any of the structural issues with how workers were being treated—the vast rates of chronic fatigue in the rail industry, declining standards of safety over the past ten years, fewer and fewer carloads being shipped by rail. I reached out to Railroad Workers United to try and host a talk on campus to talk through some of these issues for the Brown community. Then working with them a little bit more, I found someone else had started the white paper. I offered to help with it because I have rail knowledge and the person that was working on it didn't necessarily have that expertise at the time. For several reasons, I ended up taking on the bulk of the project, and eventually all but the legal section. This project has just sort of exploded in scope because I want to do a really thorough job, and here we are with me still working on this about almost a year later now since I started last spring.

**3. What is your final product and how did you decide on that format?**

My project is twofold—I'm working on a white paper and a book, but both are about the case for a public rail system and what that would look like for the United States. The white paper was a little bit given to me already because that was how it was introduced to me as a project. White papers are sort of a strange entity and they're much more defined in the UK, which also has yellow papers, green papers, blue papers, various types of policy papers. In the United States, a white paper is generally just some form of policy paper that provides a scope of the topic and an argument for a certain position to be taken. It makes a lot of sense for this project because our goal is to provide both the critique of the current rail system and analysis of alternatives, and also a recommendation of how we might move forward towards a public rail system to the United States. It needs to be in a format that is both thorough but also digestible so that we can give it to legislators and other interested partners in the environmental justice community and labor unions. It needs to be something that they'll be able to read and understand but could also be used to substantiate legislation or policy making, so a policy paper/white paper, seemed right.

**4. What do you hope others take away from your work?**

I hope they take away that we sorely need a public rail system in the United States and that it truly could be transformative for our country. Looking at the impact of declining rail service over the past decades, especially accentuated since the adoption of “precision schedule railroading,” there's just been a destructive effect on rail workers' lives. What used to be a fairly good, stable, middle-class job has been turned into one of really long hours and instability. This instability has even impacted companies that ship by rail—whereas you used to get service five days a week and could ship your product out reliably by rail, sometimes the railroad is now just saying, “Yeah, we're going to come these two days this week and there's no input you can give on that.” They've arbitrarily decided that based on their profit maximization calculations. You just can't run a railroad like that and continue to support our economy, the workers, and make any kind of investment towards a decarbonized future, which really is being avoided right now. I hope that I do a good job making that case and I hope that I'm also able to articulate an alternative that people can understand and aspire towards.

**5. What has been the most surprising finding in your research process?**

I think that one of the most impactful figures is how many maintenance employees have been laid off in the past decade or so. We've lost 40% of the employees in maintenance of equipment, who take care of locomotives and railcars, and over 20% of maintenance of way workers, who take care of the tracks themselves. It's standard practice to furlough people just so that the quarterly report looks better and then you'll do the maintenance next quarter. The fact is that between this standard operating practice and that we've also lost almost a third of all our maintenance workers, and now we're seeing more accidents and derailments. It's concerning and they're really quite shocking numbers.

**6. How has your project and the fellowship changed your perspective on the research process?**

This project has changed my perspective on research, largely just based on the scope. A significant part of the project has been talking with a bunch of different partners who are interested in this research. It matters to both Railroad Workers United and the environmental justice groups I'm talking to in the various ways that it impacts the railroad workers lives and their communities. It has been a unique challenge to try to work in those perspectives and do research that does justice to their respective goals while weaving that all together into a cohesive narrative. Also, dealing with how to scope a project and know when you have enough material on a given section has been a challenge that I really didn't have to deal with before. I've written reports previously, but none of them have been anywhere near the length that this has turned into. Previously, I knew to some extent what the defined scope was—I'm writing this thousand-word paper it's going to be done when I hit thousand words. Now, I am writing this policy paper and it's done when it's done. I'm still trying to figure out how long it is going to be and where to put more emphasis. It is definitely a struggle, and it has made me need to get a much more cohesive overarching view of the project.

**7. How has engaging with the Stone Inequality Initiative shaped your future plans?**

That's hard to say because I think they're still in flux. I constantly think about what I want to do and where this project might go once it's finished. Engaging with this much discussion on railroad policy and the process of producing this level of research has

made me increasingly interested in pursuing a PhD and doing a thesis perhaps related to a public rail system in the United States. At the same time, it's been such an engaged process with very concrete impacts where I am working towards the launch of a campaign which will hopefully make actual change in the way that the rail system operates in the United States. That is also pushing me a little bit in the opposite direction to wonder if I want to instead work for a regional railroad or work for a labor union and do research where it'll be much more applied.

**8. How has the lens of concentrated wealth shaped your project?**

Concentrated wealth is central to understanding how our railroads ended up in the mess they find themselves today. The desire of investment funds to achieve greater and greater profits on a quarterly basis does not leave room for long-term planning or operating high quality service. Instead, what you get is service cuts to less profitable customers, and cost cutting via mass layoffs. There is a further issue that we are currently seeing play out whereby the CEO of Norfolk Southern, Alan Shaw, in the wake of his company's disastrous handling of East Palestine, is attempting to transition to an at least marginally better operating practice with fewer furloughs and more consistent service. Unfortunately, this has driven up costs in the short term and he's now facing a proxy battle from a group of activist investors who want to return to maximum cost cutting to make a quick buck. The only real solution is to get big money out of railroading, through public ownership, and operate the railroads in the public interest.