# Fall 2020 Brings Carnage to U.S. Railroads – Six Killed

Fall 2020 was a disaster for railroad workers in the U.S. As if the pandemic; job cuts, layoffs, and furloughs; unwarranted discipline and firings; overwork and fatigue; and the stress and hardships engendered by Precision Scheduled Railroading (PSR) were not enough, no fewer than 6 rail workers were killed on the job in just a few short weeks, from October 15th through November 22nd. The fatalities occurred in 6 separate incidents on 5 different carriers. Four of them were killed within 17 days in November.

Railroad Workers United keeps close tabs on rail workers killed each year. While last year was brutal (with RWU documenting no fewer than 22 killed on the job in the U.S. and Canada); the year 2020 – until the Fall – did not see near the number of fatalities. In fact, RWU had documented just 4 U.S. and 2 Canadian rail workers killed on the job until October 12th. Given the record of the rail carriers the past few years, this was surprising. Speculation was that the pandemic combined with PSR sharply reduced the number of both shipments and trains, and together with fewer employees working, logically meant that – all things equal – there would naturally be some degree of decline in fatalities. In addition, the completion of PTC on nearly 60,000 miles of mainline trackage in the U.S. no doubt has begun to save lives, as it protects against signal violations, train overspeed, unauthorized main track occupations and other causes of train wrecks and resultant fatalities.

Whatever combinations of factors – PTC, fewer employees, fewer trains, less freight, and/or sheer luck – might have helped to keep in check the number of on-the-job fatalities for the first nine months of 2020, they certainly did not come into play by the Fall. Starting mid-month, a whole series of mishaps took place which would take the lives of a half dozen workers in as many separate incidents across the U.S. on five different railroads.

The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) – the agency that keep tabs on injuries and fatalities on U.S. railroads reported 17 U.S. rail worker deaths in 2018 (the first year that PSR was universally implemented by most U.S. Class One railroads), up from 11 the year prior. The agency had reported just 4 on-the-job deaths prior to October 12th. Now, when combined with the loss of an MTA worker in early September in the Bronx, NY, the total rail worker on-the-job fatalities in the U.S. for 2020 has reached 11. Note: FRA and RWU annual statistics may not always be agreement since RWU recognizes both U.S. and Canadian rail workers, and often includes railroad contract workers, transit workers, and others in our tallies).

Below is a listing of those U.S. railroad workers killed on the job the past few weeks in the Fall of 2020.

**Ryan Joseph Sandy**, 37, of Mechanicsville, Virginia was killed on **October 12** while working as a Conductor at Acca Yard in Richmond. He was an 11-year veteran, a former Local Chairman, and a member of SMART-TD Local #662. He leaves behind a wife and 5 children.



On **October 15th**, **Warren Thomson** age 59, from Monterey, Massachusetts, was working to replace a section of tracks, died after being run over by an excavator in Canaan, CT. Thomson was a longtime member of the local volunteer fire department, worked construction earlier in life, and had worked for the Housatonic Railroad for 20 years.

Then a few weeks later, **Beau Patrick Thomas** died from a work-related accident on Norfolk Southern property on **November 5th**, at the age of 35. Thomas worked for Norfolk Southern for 15 years in various roles, including Engineer, Conductor, Yardmaster, and Switchman, and was killed at the railroad's Rossville, TN internodal facility. He leaves behind a wife and two children.

**Brandon Warnick** – a Conductor with Decatur & Eastern Illinois Railroad, a 126 mile shortline WATCO company - was killed during a switching accident on **November 11th**. The incident took place on the grounds of Cabot Corp.'s silica plant in Ficklin, Illinois, an unincorporated area 4 miles west of Tuscola, about 33 miles east of Decatur. He was 35 years old and was engaged in switching out the facility at the time.

**On November 17th**, workers from Continental Rails Inc. were making replacing ties on a 12.1 mile section of track owned by the Canadian National. A CN locomotive operated by employees of Alabama Export Railroad was headed toward the Alabama State Docks when it collided with the Continental Rails crew. **Dexter Earl Scott**, a worker from Laurel, Miss., died in the accident and two others were injured.



Finally, on **November 22nd**, **Paul M. Payne** of Mount Vernon, Ohio, a member of SMART-TD Local 1397 in Columbus, Ohio, lost his life in an accident at the CSX yard in Fostoria, Ohio. Brother Payne, a conductor for the previous eight years, was at work setting out a cut of cars in the yard located in northwest Ohio when he was fatally injured. He is survived by his wife and 5 children.

