CN launches post-strike 'recovery plan'

Tentative agreement with Teamsters Canada Rail Conference would give workers control over rest periods

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MONTREAL — Canadian National has announced it is implementing a “recovery plan” to respond to the traffic backlog created by an eight-day strike, Canada's longest rail work stoppage in a decade — an effort that could include bringing back some recently laid-off workers.

The railroad and Teamsters Canada Rail Conference, representing conductors, train persons, and yard workers, announced a tentative agreement on Tuesday. The Winnipeg Free Press reports that the agreement includes a provision that fatigued workers would not be compelled to work past the start of their rest breaks. Currently, workers must stay on the job and file a grievance about missed rest after the fact.

The newspaper quoted a letter by CN labor-relations director Joe Torchia, an appendix to the tentative agreement, reading, “I will advise all company officers that we shall waive the work-now-grieve-later principle if an employee seeks to book rest, where the employee is fatigued on the job and seeks to be relieved.”

The draft version of the agreement also includes a 2.5% increase in hourly, mileage-based, and flat-rate pay as of July 23, 2019; an identical increase in 2020, and a 3% increase in 2021, the Free Press reports. The union has said the ratification process could take several months.

CN hopes operations will be back to normal by Christmas, CN Senior Vice President and Chief Legal Officer Sean Finn told Reuters. Finn told the news service that the railroad was considering bringing back some furloughed crews and might reactivate some stored locomotives to address the backlog. "Anything we can do to accelerate the recovery, we'll do so."

In a press release, CN said it operated at approximately 10% of capacity during the strike, and that every day of the strike can cause several days of backlog.

"CN remains focused on growth and is already in recovery mode as our employees return to their normal shifts," CN President and CEO JJ Ruest said in the release. "Overriding emphasis will be placed on safety as we implement a disciplined and progressive ramp up to avoid congestion that can overwhelm parts of the supply chain that are the most vulnerable."