



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Winnipeg, MB

Day 2

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EVIDENCE

Witness 8: Sean Howe

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[00:00:00]

Wayne Lenhardt

Our next witness is Sean Howe. So, Sean, if you could give us your name, spell it out for us, and then you have to do an oath for me.

Sean Howe

Yeah, Sean Howe, S-E-A-N H-O-W-E.

Wayne Lenhardt

And do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, during these proceedings?

Sean Howe

I do.

Wayne Lenhardt

You live in Winnipeg or close to it, am I correct?

Sean Howe

Yeah, just outside of the city.

Wayne Lenhardt

I don't know that much turns on it, but let's call it a Canadian railroad, and you have been employed for a number of years with a Canadian railroad, correct?

Sean Howe

Yes, as a conductor first, now a locomotive engineer, going on since 2011.

Wayne Lenhardt

And you have been an engineer running the engines for how long?

Sean Howe

Since 2015.

Wayne Lenhardt

The mandates developed over time. From our discussion, they were talked about in September of 2021, then they were put off until October. And they finally came into effect November the 15th of 2021, is that correct?

Sean Howe

That's correct.

Wayne Lenhardt

And what happened to your employment after that?

Sean Howe

I was placed on unpaid leave of absence with an undetermined end date.

Wayne Lenhardt

And you understood that the mandates were coming, correct?

Sean Howe

They kept on hinting at them and then kept pushing them back. The first one was supposed to take place immediately after the federal election that year.

Wayne Lenhardt

And were these a railway mandate in itself?

Sean Howe

No, it's a federally regulated mandate, so any business or employed federally person would have fallen under the umbrella of these mandates.

Wayne Lenhardt

And railways fall under that requirement because they're federally regulated, correct?

Sean Howe

Correct.

Wayne Lenhardt

You determined that you were not going to take the vaccine, and so you were placed on indefinite leave. What happened to your finances after that?

Sean Howe

Well, it's no secret that railroaders make a lot of money. Basically, it's up to how much you work. But I essentially went from \$160,000 a year to almost a third of that, just because I did find employment thereafter, but like I said, at a fraction. Similarly to what the police officer kind of went through.

Wayne Lenhardt

And at some point, those mandates were rescinded.

Sean Howe

Yeah, in June of 2022.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay, and that left you on indefinite unpaid leave for how many months?

Sean Howe

Around eight months.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay, so how did you cope during that time?

Sean Howe

Well, fortunately, I was not affected in a way that the previous two witnesses were. Coming up here and talking about economic losses kind of falls short compared to their stories. But seeing in my wife's behaviours, how worried she became—

Wayne Lenhardt

Did you qualify for any kind of assistance?

Sean Howe

No, no, I never applied. I've never applied for EI in my life; I refuse to do that. But through the channels by which I spoke to other people who were also put off work, I had been made aware that they were being denied their employment insurance claims based— Because their record of employment showed that they were, in fact, "dismissed with cause."

Wayne Lenhardt

But did you ever check your status?

Sean Howe

No, I did not.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay. But in any event, they did rehire you at some point, correct?

Sean Howe

Yeah, I was graciously invited back to my job.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay. But that took eight months while you were on unpaid. What losses did you incur in that time?

Sean Howe

We estimated we lost probably around \$80,000.

[00:05:00]

Wayne Lenhardt

That's 80, as in eight-zero. 80,000?

Sean Howe

Yeah, and we have about \$40,000 in new debt.

Wayne Lenhardt

So are you still in the process of paying that off?

Sean Howe

Yep.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay. How did you survive in the meantime, while you were on eight months of unpaid leave?

Sean Howe

Like I said, a like-minded individual offered employment when he heard about my situation. Prior to the mandates in May of '21, we had sold our house and moved outside the city. And it was basically the equity from that sale that we subsided on, which we had

obviously other plans for, other than just to survive on it. And then racked up the line of credit, credit cards, so on and so forth.

My wife, she has her own small business that she's trying to get going on the side. So that has helped too. But it was looking like I was going to have to go back out west after nearly 20 years of not working on the pipelines or the rigs. I was in the midst of my physical aptitude testing for that. At 40 years old, I was going to go back onto the drilling floor. That was the plan.

Wayne Lenhardt

From our chats you had mentioned that you had been an oil rig worker at one point, and you had also done some construction work. So did you pick up some of that during the eight months?

Sean Howe

Yeah, that's primarily what I did. We worked on some small apartment renovations in an elderly complex, which I didn't have to mask up for, and nobody got sick as a result of it.

Wayne Lenhardt

We chatted about this briefly. Were there similar mandates for all of the Canadian railroads? There aren't a huge number, but—

Sean Howe

So it was a blanket mandate, but I was informed during our time off that exemptions were granted to other railways, some in part and some total in full. Because for one of these railways to lose their unvaccinated employees, it would have meant that life-saving resources would not have gotten to the mostly fully vaccinated northern communities here in Manitoba.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay. There was an exception of some kind for those?

Sean Howe

After speaking with one of the general managers, yes, that was what I was told.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay. I think I'm going to turn it over to the commissioners in a minute. But is there anything else you want to add to the hardships that you sustained in that period?

Sean Howe

In terms of hardships, it's mostly economical. But as we all know, economics, economics, it has an impression upon people in a wider variety than just the money in your pocket. It does factor into mental health, into emotional health. It hasn't been easy, but it could have been worse.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay, do the commissioners have any questions? Yeah, Dr. Massie.

Commissioner Massie

Thank you, Mr. Howe, for your testimony. I was wondering now that you're back on the work, what's the work environment in terms of the relationship with your colleagues or boss?

Sean Howe

For me, it's mostly been positive. There's obviously some individuals who are not happy that we are back. They've made it apparent through some literature or some words they've scribbled here and there. But I've had more positive interactions from people coming up to me and saying that they admire what we did. By taking our stand, that they wish they could have too.

Commissioner Massie

And you also mentioned that there was some exemption for some of the employees. You have any idea of what were the criteria to grant those exceptions?

Sean Howe

There was religious exemptions that in some cases were honoured and some not. Somebody I know personally applied for an exemption based on his Treaty Status and his belief system through that, and this was granted.

[00:10:00]

It was not something that I was willing to consider, personally, because at that point in time, I hadn't quite found my faith. So in all good honesty, I couldn't have put that forward. And I had intentions of joining the Rocco Galati lawsuit, and that was one of the things that you couldn't have done in order to be eligible. You couldn't apply for an exemption.

Commissioner Massie

Thank you.

Commissioner Drysdale

Good afternoon. Were there others that you knew of from your employer that also were sent home without pay?

Sean Howe

Yeah, there's hundreds.

Commissioner Drysdale

Correct me if I'm wrong. Is there a glut of locomotive engineers in the railway industry?

Sean Howe

Is there a lot?

Commissioner Drysdale

Is there an excess? Are there lots and lots and lots of locomotive engineers?

Sean Howe

There's quite a few people qualified, but working engineers, I want to say it's probably around 3,000 to 5,000 across Canada.

Commissioner Drysdale

What my question really is— Are there too many locomotive engineers? What I'm trying to say is, if they put you out of work and sent you home without pay, did that affect the operation of the railway?

Sean Howe

It didn't seem to be the case for us, but for others, perhaps.

Commissioner Drysdale

Thank you.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay, any other questions? Okay, thank you very much, Sean, and we appreciate your testimony.

Sean Howe

Thank you.

[00:11:58]

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