

BLET union calls nationwide strike vote in US rail industry

Tom Hall
23 June 2022

Rail workers: We want to hear from you. What are your working conditions like, and what do you think is necessary in order to win this struggle? Fill out the form below to share your thoughts. We will protect your anonymity.

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET), a subsidiary of the Teamsters union, announced Wednesday it would hold a strike vote covering tens of thousands of members in the railroad industry. Workers at the major Class I railroads have been without a new industry-wide contract for nearly three years.

That a strike vote has been called at all is an indication of the explosive levels of anger among railroaders, who are confronting conditions which are so bad that the industry itself is on the brink of collapse.

The seven Class I railroads have lost a combined 45,000 workers over the last six years, equal to 30 percent of the workforce. The cause of this wave of resignations is the massive levels of profiteering by the billionaire railroad owners, such as Warren Buffett (whose Berkshire Hathaway owns BNSF) and Bill Gates (who owns a major stake in Canadian National), as well as major Wall Street firms which dominate the industry.

“The rail industry is imploding!” a worker in the Kansas City, Missouri, area told the WSWs this week. “People are walking away mid-career because it’s become such a ruthless, toxic place to work.”

Anger has been fueled by punitive new scheduling policies, which leave workers constantly on call, such as “Precision Schedule Railroading” at CSX in 2019 and “Hi Viz” this year at BNSF. The imposition of Hi Viz has produced a wave of nearly 2,000 resignations at this one railroad over the past several months.

In addition, the railroads have suspended safety protocols during the pandemic and created “super pools,” under which crews are often scheduled to work routes which they are not familiar with. Accidents and deaths are a regular occurrence, and derailments happen every day on average across North America.

The railroad industry is attempting to use this manpower crisis of their own making to push for even deeper concessions, above all, the reduction of rail crews from two to one, which

has been at the top of the industry’s list of goals for years.

Time is of the essence. Having announced a strike vote, the BLET will do everything it can to try to prevent one from actually taking place. The union has continuously sought to smother opposition, encouraging intervention by the Biden administration and fruitless appeals to the railroads’ boardrooms for “corporate responsibility.”

US railroaders should organize now to establish rank-and-file control over their struggle in order to prevent yet another sabotage by the BLET bureaucracy and other rail unions. Rank-and-file committees, such as those initiated by workers earlier this year at BNSF and Canadian Pacific, should be expanded to every terminal and workplace.

These committees will provide a means for rail workers to formulate demands based on what they actually need and to coordinate their struggle across North America and beyond.

A strike of the US railroad workers bears enormous potential to both encourage and link up with a growing upsurge of the class struggle all over the world.

- This week a series of nationwide rail strikes in the United Kingdom, the first in decades, has effectively shut down much of the country.

- A recent nationwide strike by South Korean truckers paralyzed large parts of the shipping industry in that export-dependent country.

- On Thursday, a 24-hour warning strike shuttered ports nationwide in Germany.

- Workers in Turkey have carried out hundreds of wildcat strikes and a 100,000 doctors walked out earlier this month for better wages and working conditions.

- Nationwide protests have also been taking place in the island country of Sri Lanka against the soaring cost of living for the past three months.

- In Canada, hundreds of signalmen walked out last weekend at Canadian National, and thousands of workers at Canadian Pacific were locked out earlier this year, before the Trudeau government intervened to ensure a settlement was reached on the company’s terms.

Work stoppages are also up sharply within the US itself this year, with 215 strikes so far in 2022, compared to 123 this time last year, according to Cornell’s Labor Action Tracker. Next

week, a major contract expires for 20,000 dockworkers on the West Coast, the point of origin for much of the freight running on US railroads.

While railroad workers launched many powerful strikes in the late 19th century, a nationwide railroad strike in the US would have few precedents since the passage of the Railway Labor Act (RLA) in 1926.

The RLA all but bans strikes, imposes endless rounds of mandatory federal mediation and provides the courts with the means to issue regular injunctions. A 47-day strike at Canadian Pacific's US subsidiary Soo Line in 1994 ended with federal intervention under the RLA. In 2001, a strike at Union Pacific lasted only a few hours before a judge issued a restraining order.

A strike vote against Hi Viz passed overwhelmingly at BNSF earlier this year, but workers were legally barred from striking by an injunction issued by a federal judge under the RLA. The injunction not only prohibited strikes, but also any form of "self-help," including informational picketing or even advocating for a strike.

The BLET and the SMART-TD union quickly took responsibility for enforcing the injunction in the broadest possible fashion. Meanwhile, the unions organized protest stunts outside of the Berkshire Hathaway board meeting and wrote a letter pleading with the board to "investigate" Buffett and BNSF CEO Kathy Farmer. A similar letter appealing to Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and Labor Secretary Marty Walsh went unanswered.

However, opposition among BNSF workers is so high that the sentiment is increasingly in favor of a strike regardless of what the union and the pro-corporate laws say.

The unions were released last week from mediation by the federal government, triggering a 30-day "cooling off" period which lasts until July 18. Under the Railway Labor Act, the White House can then intervene by creating a "Presidential Emergency Board" (PEB), blocking a strike and attempting to impose a binding settlement. This PEB is the most likely outcome, and it is what the BLET has been openly maneuvering for in recent weeks. If the PEB fails to come up with a deal, Congress can then intervene.

The Biden administration is closely following the crisis in the railroad industry, as indicated by hearings on the subject by the Surface Transportation Board (STB) earlier this year.

The union is attempting to delude workers into thinking that intervention by Biden, who presents himself as the most "pro-union president in American history," will be to their benefit. In fact, the real content of this label is that Biden, a reactionary capitalist politician, is relying heavily on the union bureaucracy to smother strikes and enforce cuts to real wages and other concessions.

The Democratic Party and sections of the ruling class see in the union apparatus a critical tool to enforce labor discipline and a reactionary "national unity," particularly as the US-

NATO proxy war against Russia continues to rapidly escalate.

Earlier this year, Biden held regular behind-the-scenes talks with the United Steelworkers and its President Tom Conway in the lead-up to the expiration of a national contract in the oil refineries. The aim was to prevent a strike and force through a sellout, which Conway boasted was "non-inflationary."

The Biden administration is also working closely with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, together with port administrators, in an effort to prevent any work stoppages at the West Coast ports once the contract expires July 1.

There can be no doubt that any intervention by the White House in the railroads will similarly be directed at securing the profit interests of the corporations and Wall Street and ensuring that there is no disruption to US imperialism's war effort.

However, the combination of bureaucratic maneuvering, dishonest phrase-mongering, and closer collaboration with the state by the unions has done little to contain the growth of the class struggle over the past two years. A series of betrayals of strikes in industries across the country (Volvo Trucks, Kellogg's, John Deere, Chevron and others) has only incensed workers and more deeply isolated the union bureaucracy. This is expressed above all in the proliferation of rank-and-file committees founded by workers over the past 18 months to fight against both corporate attacks and union sabotage.

Railroaders should turn out in the broadest possible numbers to deliver a unanimous approval of strike action in the upcoming vote. At the same time, they must reject the BLET's "strategy" of bureaucratic stalling under the RLA. In reality, this is a strategy for enforcing a defeat.

Instead, workers must organize themselves independently in a nationwide and international network of rank-and-file committees at all the railroads to fight for a rejection of the RLA framework and to prepare for coordinated strike action—to improve wages, staffing, safety, working hours and to end the campaign for one-man crews.

Workers should demand the repeal of the RLA and other labor laws which strip workers of their basic democratic rights and keep them in a legal straitjacket. The unions welcome endless government-imposed mediation, injunctions and "emergency boards" because it gives them a weapon to use against rank-and-file opposition. A real fight is only possible on the basis of a fight against this entire corporatist framework.

In this struggle, the real allies of rail workers are not the big business politicians but the port workers, autoworkers, truck drivers, Amazon workers and others in the US and around the world who are also seeking to fight back against runaway inflation and unbearable working conditions.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact