

“We need at least 50 percent, minimum, over 5 years”—Railroaders explain their demands as nationwide balloting for strike continues

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Rail workers: tell us what are your working conditions like and what you think is necessary in order to win this struggle. All submissions will remain anonymous.

Railroad workers in the Brotherhood Of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) are voting through July 12 on a nationwide strike authorization at the Class I railroads. An overwhelming vote in favor is all but certain, given the massive levels of anger among railroaders over worsening conditions in the industry that have driven tens of thousands to resign in recent years and left the industry itself understaffed to the point of near-collapse. Railroaders have been working without a new contract for nearly three years.

The BLET, however, has made clear that it does not want to call a strike regardless of the outcome of the vote. Instead, the union is maneuvering for the appointment of a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) by President Joe Biden. This is the next prescribed stage in the virtually endless levels of federal mediation imposed on workers by the 1926 Railway Labor Act (RLA), whose purpose is to all but eliminate strikes. The RLA was used earlier this year by a federal judge to issue an injunction against a potential strike at BNSF, after workers voted to authorize strike action against the new “Hi Viz” attendance policy.

Under the terms of the RLA, Biden can appoint a PEB as early as July 18, less than a week after the end of the strike vote, once a 30-day “cooling off” period ends. The PEB will then be tasked with coming up with a settlement which is binding on both parties. If it is unable to do so, the matter can then be referred to Congress.

Railroaders, however, are fed up with endless delays. “There was no cost of living, not even a thank you, and we worked right through COVID for two years,” one 17-year veteran of CSX told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “We can’t strike, they [the BLET] say, but the top union

officials don’t work under their own agreements, and most guys think they are paid off. I could get you 50 or 60 more [to] tell you the same story.

“We work 12 hours as federal law allows, but we are somewhere waiting on a taxi for two more hours because they don’t want to use another taxi. Many days we are on duty 12 to 17 hours. The attendance policy is so bad; the mediator told them it was unfair and to change it—which they did and made it worse. Then it goes another six months to a year before they meet again.” He summed up the relations between the company and workers by saying, “It’s toxic; if the feds or union don’t do something, then we will.”

Another railroader in upstate New York recently said, “I have worked for a Class 1 railroad for 27 years now, and never have I seen morale so low. The carrier has unreasonable demands on us workers, and you *never* have enough time off. *You never come to work truly rested*, which is very dangerous.”

“We are now three years without a contract, and many of my fellow brothers have *died working through the pandemic*. I know eight engineers who died from COVID in the past two years, while the carrier makes us report to work regardless of our health. If you mark off, you’d better be almost dead, or you will get disciplined. We are extremely underpaid, and the job leaves no room for a normal life.

“You spend the bulk of your time in hotels or on a train 12 hours a day, and they are so short crews you sit on a train for up to 15 or 16 hours because they have no one to relieve you when you’re out of time to work. I would’ve never taken this job had I known what it would turn into some 27 years later.

“When I started, it was a great job with above average pay. Our last two or three contracts, the raises we got

were disgusting and didn't keep up with inflation. I now find myself struggling just to pay bills that were never a problem in the past. Our paycheck hasn't increased, but inflation has. Our money does not go as far as it once did. We need a *substantial* raise on this upcoming contract, *at least 50 percent minimum over five years.*

"I know many railroaders who are divorced because we are never home long enough to have a happy marriage, you miss seeing your kids grow up, and you are never home for holidays. It is a terrible career and would not recommend it to anyone anymore."

A BNSF worker from the Midwest said, "I have work for the BNSF railroad since 2005. Every year since 2005, pay and quality time off has been less and less. Pay raises are always two years behind due to contract negotiations and don't keep up with inflation. Health care premiums have doubled since I started.

"Meanwhile, the railroad and stock holders are making record profits. Does that sound fair? In making those record profits, oil companies, agriculture companies, chemical companies and pretty much anyone the railroads haul freight for have suffered. They have suffered because the railroads are cutting costs, which means less employees to work, less equipment like locomotives to move freight. ... This all leads to poorer service to customers and more profits to railroads. It's all corporate greed."

He continued, "Another issue I have is quality time off. Over the years the railroads took away the markup boards, cut layoff allocations and limited vacation usage. Some people are forced to sell back vacation because they are unable to get it approved. Sad.

"What needs to happen is a fair wage with fair quality time off. When I'm talking about time off, I mean a schedule. We need days on and days off like normal Americans. Not this on call, 24/7 with no days off. We need to get this Hi-Viz points system eliminated. It is unfair and barbaric. ... We are sick of being just a number."



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