

US Chamber of Commerce calls on Biden to head off national railroad strike

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On Wednesday, the US Chamber of Commerce issued an open letter to President Biden urging him to take measures to block a nationwide railroad strike. Railroad workers at all seven Class I major railroads have been without a new contract for nearly three years and are currently balloting to approve strike action.

The big-business body urged Biden to appoint a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) to impose a settlement on the railroad workers. A PEB is one of the last steps in the maze of legally required federal mediation steps under the Railway Labor Act, a pro-business law aimed at all but banning strikes. Under the law, Biden can move to appoint such a board as early as 12:01 AM on July 18, when a 30-day cooling-off period expires. It is widely expected that this is exactly what the White House will do.

Such a move was necessary, the letter said, to protect the “American economy,” the Chamber officials claimed. “The U.S. business community faces enormous challenges today from record inflation, labor shortages, and ongoing supply chain disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic,” it declared. “Any breakdown would be disastrous for U.S. consumers and the economy, and potentially return us to the historic supply chain challenges during the depths of the pandemic.” This professed concern for the American consumer is the same language a federal judge used to justify an injunction earlier this year to block a potential strike by BNSF railroad workers against the punishing new “Hi-Viz” attendance policy.

In reality, supply chains are being stretched to the breaking point as a consequence of the profit-driven policies carried out by capitalist governments in the US and around the world and their refusal to take any serious public health measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic. Tens of thousands of railroaders have been driven out of the industry in recent years due to sickness and impossible working conditions. As a result, the remaining workers have been pushed beyond their physical limits.

One former railroader who worked for six years in the industry told the WSW: “The last five years we all saw the

railroad plummet. The quality of life with family is nonexistent. Trying to ask off is like pulling teeth. It takes forever to get a decent amount of vacation and when you do ask off, management puts a guilt trip on you or just flat out denies your vacation. They preach about safety in every briefing we had, but in the next sentence they wanted us working in the most unsafe conditions. One supervisor said, ‘I don’t care how you get it done, just get it done and get the cars up the hill!’

“After I got furloughed last year, I made a very hard decision to not go back, and it turned out to be the best decision I ever made. It’s very sad to see the bigwigs make millions of dollars and then on top of that they get million-dollar bonuses. At the same time, while they are making their multiple million-dollar salary, tons of railroaders are busting their ass, or worse, getting furloughed.

“The railroad definitely needs an attitude adjustment and I hope the boys stick together and strike. I will support them all the way and will encourage them to stand up for themselves and make a stand against the greedy corporate men and women.”

The fact that the nation’s preeminent business organization is calling upon the government to intervene to prevent a strike is wholly expected. But in fact, the Chamber of Commerce is trailing after the Teamsters-affiliated Brotherhood Of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) and the other 11 unions in the United Rail Unions bargaining coalition, which have been pushing for the appointment of a PEB since late May.

Even though it has been compelled to call a strike vote due to rank-and-file anger over brutal scheduling and stagnating wages, the unions have no intention of calling a walkout. Instead, they are working hand-in-glove with the White House and corporate America to essentially legalize strikes and impose a settlement favorable to the railroads.

The Biden administration is accelerating its corporatist policy of drawing the unions and the corporations more closely into government structures in the name of defending “national interests.” The aim of this is to suppress the

resistance of workers to corporate-government demands that they pay for the capitalist economic crisis and the massive cost of war against Russia and ultimately China. Biden's plan is to use the corrupt, pro-corporate trade union bureaucracy as an extension of state repression against the rising wave of strikes and working-class resistance.

The developments in the railroads come amid an extraordinary intervention by the White House to block a strike on the West Coast docks. Administration officials are in daily discussions with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the employers' group the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA). In a joint statement last month with the PMA shortly after Biden's visit to the Port of Los Angeles, the ILWU declared that it had no intention of even preparing for a strike. Instead, it has forced 22,000 dockworkers to stay on the job a week after the expiration of their previous contract on July 1.

Numerous business groups have issued similarly nervous statements about the potential of a dock strike, urging even more direct involvement by Biden in the name of preserving "the integrity of American supply chains." In reality, they know that a struggle at either the docks or the railroads would have immense impact on workers around the country and the world. Last month, nationwide strikes took place in the British railways and in the ports of Germany and Greece.

The United Rail Unions (URU) would have workers believe that the PEB would be a neutral body or even favorable to railroaders. In a joint statement last month, it called on workers to call their Congresspeople "to voice their support for a labor-friendly PEB, and if necessary, labor-friendly legislation to bring this round of bargaining to a successful conclusion."

But the same White House is backing the Federal Reserve's interest rate hikes aimed at driving up unemployment, even to the point of sparking a recession, to drive down wages. The federal judge's strikebreaking injunction against BNSF workers earlier this year was met with a guilty silence from the White House, which hypocritically claims to defend "workers' rights."

Indeed, the URU is compelled to acknowledge in the same statement that even if the White House fails to enforce a settlement, Congress would likely intervene to pass a law preventing a strike. While it is certain to respond favorably to requests from the unions and the Chamber of Commerce to appoint a PEB, the White House did not bother to respond to a groveling union letter to intervene against Hi-Viz.

Among railroaders, a different mood is taking hold. They are fed up with the endless days and bureaucratic maneuvers and are determined to wage a struggle. In response to the impending PEB, one worker said, "If it takes [union officials] going to jail [for striking in violation of the RLA],

then go to jail. A lot of us are willing and ready to walk off the job, no matter what the PEB board says. If they don't get what we need, then I will throw away my 20 years on this job and start a new career in a different industry."

Another worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "It's time to change these things. It's time to make the railroads realize exactly who makes the record profits that they enjoy, and who is really in control of their destiny. The proverbial pie is getting bigger, but the piece that the actual workers are given to divide is getting smaller. It's time to make the necessary changes."

A real fight must begin not by subordinating workers to the government and the Railway Labor Act but from rejecting this completely undemocratic and illegitimate framework. Workers are up against not only the railroads but against the union officialdom and the US government which, whether controlled by Democrats or Republicans, is the tool of big business. A fight to defend the needs of workers necessitates a fight against the ever expanding US proxy war against Russia, which threatens to erupt into a world war.

Everything depends on the independent initiative of workers themselves. The strike vote, which is expected to be near unanimous, cannot be a worthless gesture. Workers are ready to fight but they need to organize a nationwide rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the union apparatus, to outline their demands for inflation-busting wages, an end to intolerable schedules and dangerous working conditions and other critical improvements. This strike committee should also communicate with and coordinate joint action with dockworkers, truck drivers and other critical sections of the working class.



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