

US rail union president denounces claims he is pressing for strike action, significant wage increases

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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 across the United States complete their balloting today to authorize strike action. The vote is guaranteed to pass by an overwhelming margin. Workers have been working without a contract for nearly three years and thousands of railroaders have been driven to resignation by intolerable working conditions, above all a scheduling system which leaves them “on call” 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The US railroad industry is controlled by one of the most onerous, pro-corporate labor laws in the country, the Railway Labor Act (RLA). It imposes a nearly endless series of mandated mediation, federal arbitration and other ploys with the aim of all but eliminating strikes. After nearly three years of fruitless talks, workers will in theory finally be legally allowed to engage in a strike on July 18, when a 30-day “cooling-off” period expires. However, President Biden is almost certain to intervene immediately to appoint a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB), blocking a strike in a bid to enforce a settlement mediated by the White House.

Generations of experience have taught railroaders that the PEB, like the RLA as a whole, is nothing but a straitjacket imposed upon them to keep them from fighting endless concessions demanded by the railroads. The unions, however, have thrown their full support behind the strictures of the RLA and are actively calling on Biden to appoint a PEB, effectively demanding that the White House legalize strike action. The pro-corporate labor bureaucracy supports the RLA because it assures them of a “seat at the table” in jointly enforcing concessions, while giving them legal leverage with which to threaten rank-and-file opposition.

This was made clear in a revealing statement Friday by International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers-Transportation Division (SMART-TD) President Jeremy Ferguson. Titled “The TRUTH about the railroad supply chain and labor negotiations,” it is presented as a rebuttal of lies about the union from the industry group, the

Association of American Railroads (AAR).

In reality, it was intended for two competing audiences, railroad workers and railroad management. On the one hand, the union president offered up to workers empty, demagogic broadsides against “corporate greed.” But to management, he was far more concrete in giving assurances that the bureaucracy is doing everything it can to help force through a sellout.

Ferguson began by denouncing as malicious lies any insinuation that the unions were pressing for strike action—something which is exactly what the vast majority of railroaders want.

“Let me be clear,” Ferguson said. “[R]ail labor is NOT looking to strike or shut down the nation’s economy at the expense of everyone. We want and deserve a fair agreement for our members. We strongly believe that a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) will help us to garner that without the necessity of a strike. This does not mean that we will not do what’s necessary to get a fair agreement, but rather we expect the Railway Labor Act (RLA) to do its job as it has in the past so that it does not come to that. We are fully prepared to act if the provisions of the RLA get to the point of self-help or strike.”

The “job” of the RLA which Ferguson refers to is to tie workers’ hands behind their backs so that they cannot fight. This was demonstrated earlier this year when a federal judge issued an injunction against a strike by BNSF workers against management’s unilateral imposition of the hated new “Hi-Viz” attendance policy. This makes clear the meaning of the last sentence, which is an exercise in doublespeak. Ferguson declares the unions are prepared to strike, if and when the Biden Administration and Congress, through the provisions of the RLA, allow them to. In other words—never.

Ferguson’s claim that a rail strike would be at the “expense of everyone” is not only false, but taken right out of the press releases of the AAR and the railroads’ bargaining coalition, the National Railway Labor Conference. A strike would be at the expense of the billionaires and Wall Street hedge funds that control the railroads, as well as other major corporations which have raked in trillions in profits in spite of the pandemic and

growing economic crisis.

For workers, a strike would not only meet with widespread support, but would be a signal call to press for their own demands. Workers everywhere are fighting against the runaway cost of living, brutal working hours and unsafe working conditions. Support for a national rail strike could coalesce into a powerful class movement against not only individual employers but against the profit system itself.

This was the case again and again in railroad strikes before the passage of the RLA in 1926, including the Great Railway Strike of 1877, the first nationwide strike movement in US history, and the Pullman Strike of 1894, whose leader Eugene Debs went on to become the most popular socialist leader in American history. It is why Congress decided to pass the RLA to legally prohibit strikes in the first place.

The corporate elite know they are sitting on a powder keg. They look with intense fear at the wave of social protests and strikes around the world, in particular the mass demonstrations in Sri Lanka over crushing inflation, which culminated last weekend in the storming by workers of the presidential palace and the resignation of the government. *Forbes* expressed the mood within ruling circles in a recent headline, which asked, “Inflation Protests Span Sri Lanka, Albania, Argentina, Panama, Kenya, Ghana—How Long Before They Hit The United States?”

Under these conditions, the union bureaucracy is seeking to render corporate America crucial support, closing ranks with the Biden administration in a bid to prevent strikes. This is a nationwide phenomenon. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which has been in daily discussions with the White House, is keeping 24,000 West Coast dockworkers on the job, without even a formal contract extension, more than a week after their contract expired. In a joint statement with the port operators last month, the ILWU declared it had no intention of even preparing for a strike. Meanwhile, management is demanding major concessions on automation and working hours.

Ferguson claims, “We strongly believe that a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) will help us to garner that [a ‘fair agreement’] without the necessity of a strike.” But the companies certainly do not think so, which is why the US Chamber of Commerce issued an open letter recently calling on Biden to do just that. In reality, whatever it says publicly to justify itself, the union bureaucracy has no illusions either. The same Biden administration is ramping interest rates to spark mass unemployment, and would rather trigger a recession than accept wage increases that keep up with the current rate of inflation of 8.6 percent.

Ferguson denounces as “unacceptable” the companies’ proposal for a 16 percent wage increase over five years, given the current levels of inflation. In plain language, he knows that the unions could never get railroaders to accept it. Two paragraphs later, Ferguson denounces as a “fish tale” and a

“whopper” claims that they are pushing for a 47 percent wage increase.

The unions certainly are not, but workers are. One railroader recently told the WSWs that he would only accept, at minimum, a 50 percent wage increase. Indeed, such a proposal, given that it would only slightly outpace inflation, is exceptionally modest. But by denouncing the suggestion as a “whopper” Ferguson makes clear that the unions are aiming to “negotiate” a deal far below the rate of inflation.

Ferguson continues, boasting about his testimony to the Surface Transportation Board on network disruptions caused by company “mismanagement.” He concludes, “I made it clear then, and now do so once again, that we stand ready to do everything within our power to keep freight moving and to support this country’s supply chain and economy.” In other words, the rail unions “stand ready” to continue to enforce punishing attendance policies, forced overtime and lax safety measures.

In reality, it is not simple “mismanagement” but the profit motive itself which has brought the rail network to the brink of collapse. In spite of mass COVID infections, severe labor shortages, safety issues and delays, the Class I railroads are making record-breaking profits. As far as the shareholders are concerned, the railroads are being managed extremely well.

A real fight for not only better wages and working conditions, but also a rational organization of the railroads and other basic infrastructure, requires a struggle by workers against the profit system. But this is precisely what the unions reject and are directing their energies against. They tell workers that their hands, as well as those of the union, are not only bound by the RLA, but lie to them about its purpose and try to sow illusions in it. In so doing, they are acting as little more than an extension of the courts and the White House over workers.

Railroaders have no intention of accepting another round of concessions that could destroy not only their livelihoods but the railroads themselves. But this means a fight not only against the railroads but against the pro-company union bureaucracy in SMART-TD and the other rail unions. This requires the formation of a nationwide network of rank-and-file committees to assert rank-and-file control over the process, fan outward for support from other workers, especially dockworkers on the West Coast and to fight for the abolition of the anti-worker RLA once and for all.



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