

What next for US railroaders after near-unanimous strike vote?

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Railroad workers across the United States voted by 99.5 percent to authorize strike action, the Brotherhood Of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen announced Tuesday. The near unanimous vote is a powerful show of opposition and expresses a determination of railroaders to fight. A strike could legally take place as soon as July 18, at the expiration of a 30-day government-mandated “cooling off” period.

The reason for this overwhelming vote is not difficult to see. More than 115,000 railroad workers have been without a national contract for nearly three years. Because of this, they have not seen any wage increases over that time, in spite of runaway inflation, which has now topped 9 percent.

Conditions in the railroads are intolerable. Workers labor for long hours and are badly understaffed, as tens of thousands of workers have resigned from the industry in recent years. On top of the ever-present danger of COVID, derailments and other accidents are a daily occurrence. Through “Hi Viz,” “Precision Scheduled Railroading” and other punishing attendance schemes railroaders are on call 24/7, leaving them without the ability to plan their personal or family lives.

The strike is part of a global uprising by railroad workers. Following a week of nationwide strikes last month, a second round of railroad strikes has just been announced on the British commuter rails. Around the world, truckers, dockworkers and other freight and logistics workers are taking a stand.

For US railroaders, the strike vote is not simply a symbolic gesture. When they say they want to strike, they mean it. Workers know there is no other way to reverse decades of deteriorating working conditions and wages, and prevent an imminent collapse of the entire industry after endless rounds of cost-cutting by the billionaires and Wall Street firms that run the industry.

But the railroad unions have made clear they have no intention of calling a strike. BLET President Dennis Pierce sought to immediately walk back workers’ expectations in the very statement announcing the voting results. Instead, the unions have been demanding for months that the Biden administration block a strike by appointing a Presidential Emergency Board, which will attempt to enforce a contract settlement. It is likely that Biden will seek to do this almost immediately after the end of the “cooling off” period on July

18. The railroad unions’ demand for a Presidential Emergency Board amounts to a demand that the government illegalize a strike by their own members.

Pierce writes, “Today, the rail industry is running a full-blown media blitz asking for government intervention to save them from a possible legal job action by the employees that they have abused for years. Consider the hypocrisy in that.”

Consider the hypocrisy in Pierce’s own words! The unions themselves have been engaged in a “media blitz” of their own, even before the railroad industry, demanding that Biden save the union bureaucracy from a job action!

Pierce’s own statement exposes as a cheap fraud the unions’ claims that a PEB could be made to rule in workers’ favor. If that were the case, why would the industry also be demanding it? The companies know, as do the unions, despite their public statements, that Biden’s top domestic priority is to rein in wage increases. In spite of claims that railroaders and other “essential workers” must stay on the job for the sake of the “economy,” Biden and the entire political establishment are even willing to trigger an economic recession by ramping interest rates, in order to sharply increase unemployment and beat back workers’ wage demands.

The unions are also appealing for “support” from the shippers that transport their freight on the railroads and corporate America as a whole. They argue that railroad workers and these giant corporations are potential allies because they are both being hurt by “mismanagement,” which has caused widespread delays and schedule disruptions.

But the shippers’ only concern is the timely delivery of their products. They don’t care how it’s done—whether by the imposition of one-man crews, as the railroads are seeking to do, through the deployment of the National Guard to run the railroads, or through the imposition of even more onerous schedules. Even so, they would rather suffer through shortages than see a real fight by railroaders because such a struggle could spread like wildfire among their own workers, whom they are subjecting to similar conditions.

Pierce’s announcement follows similar statements by SMART-TD President Jeremy Ferguson, who denounced as a malicious slander accusations that the unions intend to organize a strike or demand wage increases that keep pace with inflation.

Instead, Ferguson said, “we expect the Railway Labor Act (RLA) to do its job as it has in the past so that it does not come to [a strike].”

The job of the RLA is to disarm workers in the face of corporate attacks by preventing strikes and imposing endless rounds of mandatory talks, mediation and arbitration. Management is held to a far looser standard. BNSF was allowed to unilaterally impose its new “Hi Viz” attendance policy this year, while a federal judge, citing the needs of US supply chains, issued an injunction under the RLA to block a strike against the punitive attendance policy. The BLET and SMART-TD unions then took responsibility for enforcing this injunction on workers in the most expansive possible terms.

The RLA also serves as a convenient excuse for the unions’ own pro-corporate policies. Even without this flagrantly anti-worker legislation, which the unions have accepted for nearly a century, they would be doing essentially the same thing. On the West Coast docks, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, which is not under RLA jurisdiction, has kept 24,000 West Coast port workers on the job for two weeks after their contract expired on July 1. Meanwhile, ILWU officials are meeting on a daily basis with the White House to discuss how to prevent walkouts, even as the ports are demanding major concessions.

In closing his statement, Pierce states, “In the end, the question of whether or not any of the rail industry’s Union-represented employees want to legally strike is secondary to what they truly want.” No, it is not secondary! The strike weapon is the most basic weapon in workers’ arsenal. Nothing has ever been won without mobilizing the strength of workers against the employers and bought-and-paid-for politicians. But the unions are working with the Biden administration to give up this weapon without a fight. In so doing, they are acting as nothing more than extensions of state repression.

Workers need to organize a fight not only against the Class I railroads, but against the pro-corporate railroad unions and both the Democratic and Republican parties. The only way forward is through a rebellion by railroaders against this entire rotten set-up and the fight for rank-and-file control.

This means the formation of a nationwide rank-and-file committee, uniting workers at all seven Class I railroads. In contrast to the union bureaucrats, who begin and end with the RLA and what the railroads are willing to give, a rank-and-file committee, composed of workers and excluding union functionaries, rejects this entire regulated framework and begins with what workers need.

The first demand of a committee should be: **Biden, stay out! No Presidential Emergency Board!** No more pro-corporate government intervention! Workers must build a movement to finally force the abolition of the RLA and defend their basic democratic right to strike.

Regardless of whether a PEB is called or not, the rank and file must determine what happens, not well-heeled union

officials talking in secret with management and government officials. Not a single worker voted to authorize their bogus “strategy” of urging the appointment of a PEB.

The bargaining committee must resign, and be replaced with one elected directly from, and composed of, rank-and-file railroaders. Meanwhile, all talks must be livestreamed over the internet, freely accessible to all railroad workers. This is the only way to defeat the union-corporate-government conspiracy to force more concessions down workers’ throats.

In addition, the committee should popularize and fight for demands which correspond to what railroaders urgently need. The *World Socialist Web Site* suggests that these include the following:

1. An end to Hi Viz, Precision Scheduled Railroading and all other abusive attendance policies. Workers must have regular, weekly working hours of no more than 40 hours per week.

2. A 50 percent wage increase to make up for years of stagnant and declining pay and reverse the exodus of workers from the industry. **In addition to this**, any contract must also include COLA in order to keep pace with rising inflation.

3. A permanent end to managements’ campaign for one-man crews, and the enshrining of at least two-person crews as a permanent norm.

4. An end to super-pools, excessively long trains, and other unsafe practices which contribute to accidents.

5. A massive increase in spending on rail infrastructure to prevent derailments and other disasters.

6. End the monopolization of the railroads by billionaires like Warren Buffett and Bill Gates. Nationalize the railroad industry and transform it into a public utility under the democratic control and collective ownership of the working class.

Finally, the rank-and-file committee should fan out and establish lines of communication with dockworkers, railroaders, truckers and other strategic sections of the working class. Railroaders are not alone. All over the world, workers are refusing to accept more concessions and more union betrayals. Railroaders’ natural allies are not to be found in the White House, nor in the offices of the shippers, but in the international working class.

If you agree with this program, contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today. We will render all assistance possible for railroad workers.



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