“It’s time to make the necessary changes”: Railroaders speak out as Biden announces emergency board to block a nationwide strike

Our reporters
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The World Socialist Web Site has received a large volume of comments from railroad workers across the United States in recent days, which we are publishing to bring attention to our world audience the conditions in the industry. Railroaders voted by 99.5 percent for strike action this month, after working nearly three years without a contract under intolerable working conditions.

However, on Friday, the Biden administration announced an executive order convening a Presidential Emergency Board, blocking a strike in a bid to impose a government settlement. The move was widely expected. The rail unions had been agitating for a PEB, effectively demanding that the government illegalize a strike of their own members. In a statement Friday, Greg Regan, President of the Transportation Trades Department (TTD) of the AFL-CIO said: “We commend President Biden for announcing a board of neutral arbitrators to investigate and report its findings and recommendations to help both parties work toward a resolution.”

But there is nothing “neutral” about the government’s intervention. The Biden administration’s top domestic priority is curbing wage growth and imposing labor discipline on the working class, which it is seeking to accomplish with the help of the pro-corporate unions. The legal basis for the PEB itself is is the viciously anti-worker Railway Labor Act, which is aimed at all but eliminating strikes in the rail and airline industries. It was used earlier this year by a federal judge to block a strike at BNSF against a punishing new attendance policy which was unilaterally imposed by management. A PEB will inevitably operate along the same lines.

If you are a railroader, we want to hear from you! What are your experiences like on the railroad? What do you think needs to change? What do you think about the conduct of the unions and the appointment of the Presidential Emergency Board? Contact us by filling out the format the end of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

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Kansas City, Missouri: “There’s really no point in a union even negotiating. They should just go straight to Congress so they can bend us over and be done with it. All politicians are bought and paid for by corporations. The unions are just trying to stay in business at this point, making it look like they’re trying to get us something. One thing I do know, is that whatever Congress eventually decides is going to be our new contract […] A lot are just sticking around to see what the new contract is, and to get the retroactive pay that’s owed to us. Good luck moving trains when they lose the experienced employees.”

Indiana: “We absolutely need our unions to not back down! If it takes them going to jail, 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.”

Western Indiana: “We worked through pandemics staying in hotels. We have worked almost three years with zero raises. It is not the work environment it was when I hired in. The pay has not kept up with the standard it was when I hired in due to inflation. It is very physically demanding and mentally taxing work. If a good solid raise isn’t on it’s way, I would assume there will be a mass exodus.”

Southern Indiana: “I have worked for CSX for more than two decades and my wife has never had to work. I was able to support my family while she took care of the house and kids while I was on the road all the time. But now she's looking for a job to make ends meet. I was recently off work for surgery and now we are trying to
catch up on bills including medical bills because our health insurance keep going up and the railroads wants to triple it! In six years I’ll have my 30 years in a few years, hopefully I can find a way to retire.”

**Shenandoah Valley, Virginia:** “It’s totally pathetic. I struggle to find words to accurately depict how poorly CSX is operated. I’ve overhead morning conference calls in which no one seems to know how to run a railroad. Company created crew shortages are a huge issue, as well as new hires quitting before they even get marked up. Morale is at an all time low due to the fact that every single person on the roster is expected to do the work of two people.

“We have a yard job that is one man on the ground, this unlucky person works 12 hours every day, walks an average of 9 miles a shift. In summary, it is an abusive, greed-inspired circus. If I didn’t have so much time on the railroad I would have quit already, but as things somehow seem to get worse every day I feel insane for even considering sticking it out till retirement. I always tell myself it can’t get any worse, but they seem to find new ingenious ways of doing just that.”

**Shreveport, Louisiana:** “The Kansas City Southern railroad employees kept working during the pandemic and were told we were essential workers. But when the government handed out the money to the railroads for essential workers, some of the managers—that were at home, by the way—got that extra pay check. We were the ones out here working risking covid. And they got their bonuses, and are still getting their bonuses. The cost of living is going up, but why do they think we don’t deserve at least a pay raise? It can’t be ignorance. They won’t work without just due compensation i.e. bonuses/perks. Why are they asking us to do that? So is it greed, because it looks like it.”

**Minnesota:** “I work for a Class I that has trackage in both Canada and the States. I have been railroading for over a decade and have never seen morale so low. There hasn’t been a single day in the last three years that I haven’t considered resigning due to the quality of life and the extreme disregard for legitimate safety concerns that have arisen due to the carriers putting fuel conservation first.

“We are extremely underpaid. We need a 300 percent raise. A 10-year captain at FedEx makes approximately $290,000 a year on just guaranteed income alone. We work more than pilots do, and our jobs are just as stressful. We get less time off at home than they do. The railroads are making billions of dollars in profit every year and we get absolutely nothing in exchange for it. Systems like trip optimizer and notch restrictions for fuel conservation lead to a loss of situational awareness, and will eventually lead to a fatal accident, but the carriers don’t care as long as they’re saving money on fuel so they can get their tax breaks.

**Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania:** “If you work(ed) for the railroad, this is what you learn(ed): Your work has provided record profits for the company. Your family, schedule, holidays, religion, and life come second to the railroad. You will be expected to memorize a rule book that is riddled with contradictions, but can and will be used to control you in ways you never imagined. You will be immersed in a poisonous culture that makes sure you know that you are expendable. You will be brow-beaten by a company that says ‘Rules don’t apply to us, and we will change them to our benefit when the need arises.’

“You will be bullied, abused, and threatened constantly. It wasn’t always this way, and it’s not the people that you work with that are guilty of causing this. It’s the people you work for. The same people that won’t agree to new contracts, because they supposed cost too much, regardless of the record profits that they reported. The same people that close facilities and delay the whole distribution process, because they aren’t getting exactly what they want.

“There are federal laws that prevent us from striking, because of the effect it could have on our nation’s economy. But the railroad doesn’t have to follow the same rules, or have the same consequences. They have forgotten that they don’t have enough salaried people to do our jobs. They cannot operate a railroad without employees.

“It’s time to change these things. It’s time to make the railroad 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.”

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