

Kentucky CSX worker describes dangerous conditions, grueling schedules as Biden moves to block strike

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Following the expiration of a “cooling off” period mandated by the Railway Labor Act, President Biden signed an executive order creating a Presidential Emergency Board to prevent a nationwide rail strike. Such a strike would find broad support among all sections of workers, threatening to ignite a push for wage increases in the face of record inflation. This is precisely why railroad executives and labor union bureaucrats begged the Biden administration to step in. The WSWS issued a statement to rail workers to form rank-and-file committees to take their contract struggle—now in its third year—into their own hands. WSWS contributor Ed Hightower spoke to a CSX worker with three decades of experience about conditions on the railroads and the need for a new political strategy for the working class.

Ed Hightower: Railroad workers voted by 99.5 percent to authorize a strike. There is eagerness for action. What motivates you and other workers to support a strike?

JD, a CSX worker: I’m sick and tired of the railroad CEOs and executives just bragging every quarter about record profits, but they barely want to do anything for the workers, especially in the last two years with COVID. For us in the department that maintains the tracks and equipment, it was a challenge to travel and find hotels that were open or to find a place to eat. CSX did absolutely nothing to help us out. They didn’t pay us one red cent on top of what they had been paying.

EH: Can you describe your workday?

JD: I work for the engineering department that maintains the track. I put the rail and the ties in. I do this within about an eight-hour travel radius from my home, but occasionally we will be 14 hours away from home: Indiana, Illinois, St. Louis, New York or New Orleans. Some crews I know travel 12-15 hours away from home for their work.

My typical start time is 5:00 a.m. Two weeks ago, we worked at one job site where we started at 11:00 a.m. or noon and worked until 1:00 a.m. for 10 days in a row. That varies from month to month and from job to job. You might start work at 2:00 a.m. and finish at 2:00 p.m. the next afternoon.

EH: What is your normal work schedule?

JD: Typically, I will travel on a Sunday. It varies, but yesterday [Sunday] was an eight-hour travel day. I’ll work 13-14 hours Monday through Thursday, then travel back home Thursday night or Friday morning. So, if I get two days off per week, I’m lucky. Last week I got home around midnight so I was off Friday and Saturday, then I was traveling again first thing Sunday morning. But the workdays themselves are at least 13-14 hours. I’ve been doing it almost 30 years and have just a few more to go before retirement.

EH: You don’t work a 40-hour week?

JD: It tends to be 55 or so hours per week, but that does not include travel time. With travel it’s 70 or more hours per week. We work no

matter the weather conditions, so if it’s five below or 105 degrees outside, we work. It is exhausting physical labor, and then we drive long distances after that. Some weeks we barely get home and have time to eat, sleep and wash our clothes before we have to get up and do it all over again.

EH: How does this affect home life?

JD: It’s tough to say the least. After a couple of marriages, I learned I have to have a spouse who supports me. The company always tells us, ‘You get it at the end,’ which means when you retire. But hell, I’ve seen so many of these guys who don’t make it to retirement, or when they do retire, they’re lucky if they make it another year after that.

EH: What do you mean “make it another year”? Do they die?

JD: Oh, yeah, they die. Divorce rates are high too, especially with some of the conductor and engineer positions. Those poor guys are never home. They work six and seven days per week, year-round.

EH: We put out a statement on the need for rank-and-file committees to take the struggle forward, and one precondition for that would be opposing the PEB and demanding Biden stay out of it. The union has pressed for a PEB in order to avoid a strike.

JD: The last time we had a PEB was around 2011 under Obama, and the wage increase we got with that wasn’t too bad, at least compared to other workers. But what people might not understand is that we work so much. We also pay into Railroad retirement and not into Social Security, which can mean contributions two or three times higher. There was a time when railroad work was a leader in wages, but that’s on the decline. As far as the PEB goes, I would rather go on strike and piss the company off instead, you know?

EH: I do, and we are very critical of the union leadership, because the strike is a very basic weapon for the working class, and the fact they are saying they want to avoid a strike is a betrayal. The leader of SMART-TD (Ferguson) says he is not trying to raise wages to keep up with inflation through a strike. First of all, it’s criminal. But second, it’s of a piece with the strategy of other unions. Tom Conway, the USW president, boasted that he prevented a strike by oil workers and signed a deal that did not “contribute to inflation.” In effect, it’s a service to Biden and to big business. The union bureaucrats say, “We don’t want you to have higher wages.” We say, “How can workers win with leadership like this?”

JD: Exactly.

EH: They want to hide behind things like the Railway Labor Act, which works much like the Taft-Hartley Act. It was invoked against the miners in the 1970s during the Carter administration, and the miners openly defied it and refused to return to work. Whether it’s a “cooling off period” or “mandatory mediation,” these are designed to limit the impact of work stoppages on business operations. So breaking out of that straitjacket is critical. Right now you have every official institution—government, business, union—lined up against the working

class, saying they intend to solve inflation by beating workers down.

JD: Railroads always want to cry the blues, but they spend billions and billions of dollars on share buybacks and executive bonuses. You don't read about it, but five years ago when the whole PSR [Precision Scheduled Railroad] thing was taking place at least through Hunter Harrison, how come the board of directors wasn't slammed for going along with this whole PSR and CSX takeover?

EH: Since 2008 and leading up to it, the line between legitimate financial transactions and fraud has been obliterated. What really drives all the deals is, "How can you squeeze more out of the workers this quarter?" They don't care about derailments or workers' safety. I sent you the article about the man who was killed in a plastic shredder. That's how they feel about the working class: "Who cares? Just replace them."

JD: You did send me that. Just awful. That's exactly their attitude. We're just numbers to them here on the railroad. If you look back seven years ago, they started to let the crews get depleted. They didn't replace enough people who left for retirement. We still haven't recovered from that. Now when they try to hire, they can't get anyone to stay. The company lies to them just to get them on the job. They tell them they will get a local job and next thing you know, they send some boy off to Alabama, and he has to go to New York next week. He isn't going to put up with that. The young guys with families and kids aren't going to do that crap. Years ago, when the money was better and they gave us a mileage rate for our travel, that was a better deal. Now the railroad won't buy us a \$20 pair of boots.

EH: Workers at Volvo NRV in Virginia have said the same thing: Since the last concession contract, they can't get new people to stay at the plant.

Turning to the PEB again, Biden is saying, on the one hand, that the labor dispute needs to be resolved because a rail strike would harm the economy; on the other, he is actually inducing a recession through lifting interest rates. It's designed to create unemployment and to drive down wages. Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker did that in the 1979 under President Jimmy Carter. We want to underscore that the Democrats are in fact vicious enemies of the working class.

PD: Well, typically you would think it's the other way around. Not all of them, but most of the Democrats are pro-union. You may have a handful of Republicans who are pro-union, but typically they are for the big companies.

EH: When Biden says "pro-union," he means pro-union apparatus. The Democrats have enlisted the union bureaucracy to suppress strikes or betray them if they can't prevent walkouts.

You mentioned that in your 2011 contract things weren't so bad in terms of wages.

JD: Right, that was two contracts ago. In the most recent contract, we only got 14 percent or so over five years. We really need a 40 percent raise because we've been falling behind. In the current contract we get around a 3 percent raise annually, and in the 2011 contract it was around 4 percent annually. CSX's first proposal to us in the current negotiation was 14 percent over five years. That was before COVID and inflation took off.

EH: Workers were already feeling this, but 9.1 percent inflation year on year is enormous. Where's your 3 percent wage increase now? It's really a 6 percent pay cut.

JD: Yes, they are just flushing it down the toilet, that's right.

EH: We are calling for a 50 percent wage increase and for a Cost-of-Living Adjustment clause.

JD: I agree with that. We gave up our COLA probably 15 years ago. And it used to be that if you worked on the railroad, you didn't pay for health insurance. Zero came out of my paycheck for that. Then little by little, a couple of contracts later we have to start paying for it. By 2011, we were paying a monthly premium and a percentage for health care visits. I am sure that lots of people would think, "Well, that's better than what I get."

EH: When the ruling class carries out an offensive, they attack workers with the best benefits *first*. They want to make an example of a certain section of workers who might be somewhat better off. It's divide-and-conquer. But the ruling class will point that out and try to use this as a battering ram, claiming that these workers need to tighten their belts. We say no, because first of all, there's nothing wrong with workers making a good living.

JD: Right.

EH: Second, when they take those workers down, they turn to put the *next* layer of workers on strict rations too. It goes that way for every section of workers. So, I don't think rail workers should be considered "privileged" or anything like that. One thing about the Obama administration was that in the Affordable Care Act, there was a tax on the so-called "Cadillac" health care plans. If workers negotiated for a particularly good health plan, this was impermissible. Everyone is now supposed to accept high cost, high premium, low benefit plans in order to guarantee profits for the giant insurance and health care companies. No attacks on your benefits are reasonable.

JD: Most of our jobs are skilled jobs. Not to take anything away from workers in the fast-food industry or anything like that, but you see an uptick in their wages. Department stores pay \$15 to \$20 per hour. Our wages should go up as well.

EH: All workers need enough to survive, and that's the big class war question: Are you supposed to go to work, risk injury and illness, for a wage you cannot survive on?

JD: That's right. I caught COVID out here two times, and the railroad doesn't give a damn about it. I first caught it in early 2020 before it was really rampant here. I remember being at a hotel, and it took me half an hour to get my stuff out of the hotel and into my car to go home. I was so wiped out. I was eventually hospitalized. It took me 12 weeks to get over the coughing. I was on numerous medications, including steroids, things to help my lungs. The railroad didn't say anything about it except, "Come back to work."

Last October, I was forced to be in a piece of equipment with an operator who had COVID. I came down with it the next week. The railroad doesn't care. When I brought it up to them, I said, "Aren't you supposed to have some sort of contact tracing, knowing who I was around?"

They absolutely did not care about it at all. They didn't care who I worked around, where I was, they never asked me one time. Nothing at all.

EH: It's interesting you say this because the ruling class talks about inflation and the supply chain problems driving up prices, but as a class they have let COVID rip through the population. They are claiming that any safety measures harm the economy. But the pandemic is really hurting workers and their ability to do their jobs. There has been a horrific death toll. It has also been this mass disabling event. A lot of people aren't capable of doing the same work they used to do. The ruling class hates it that workers care about their health. We say, "No, you should have crushed the pandemic instead of letting it rip." And as critical as we are of the Chinese regime, they have very few COVID deaths. It is doable.

JD: Exactly. They do a *real* lockdown. But I saw no contact tracing here, and I was expected to return to work quickly.

EH: Are you familiar with the Hi-Viz policy?

JD: Oh, yes. I have read about that whole deal with BNSF as far as that goes; it dramatically affects the conductors and engineers. They cut, cut, cut the workforce so damned thin. Those guys work 6-7 days per week without stop, on call, rotating shifts. It's unreal. There is no way in hell I'd have that job as a conductor or engineer. I absolutely agree with your demands against Hi-Viz. I support them, and they shouldn't have to work more than five days per week.

EH: We also call for an end to one-man crews.

JD: Well, definitely. You definitely need two-man crews on that job. I personally knew a man from Richmond, Virginia, who was on a route going down to Rocky Mount, North Carolina. He had a heart attack in the train, and he died on the locomotive pulling into Rocky Mount yard. He was an engineer, and if there had been no conductor on board, there could have been a disaster. I mean, what the hell? On a plane you have a damned pilot and a damned co-pilot. There's no difference at all in terms of safety. You need two sets of eyes. If there is some kind of warning or alert, the conductor has to inspect the train, and the engineer has to man the cab.

EH: Absolutely, it seems like a criminal policy. In every industry now you have workers who are scapegoated when an accident happens, demonized by the press and the courts and the employers. But on the flip side there is no “law and order” or “Texas justice” for the companies who enact the very policies that make accidents inevitable.

JD: Exactly, they just work us like robots. That's all they think we are. Then they do throw us a little bribe. At CSX if you don't miss any days, they enter you into a raffle for a truck. It's just a bribe for the guys, that's all it is. So, you're going through a divorce, but hey, you might win a damned truck! That won't get your wife and kids back.

EH: I mentioned this nurse to you, RaDonda Vaught, who made this medication error and owned up to it. We intervened very aggressively to defend her and other nurses rallied around her. If they hadn't, she would be in jail. It was a question of mobilizing the strength of the working class. Shortly before that there was a very militant march in Washington by nurses. These nurses, thousands of them, were ready to fight. At work, they are set up and scapegoated. It's always, “You, as the individual, failed.” But how can nurses or any other workers succeed with an impossible schedule? It is a relentless drive for profit that creates the atmosphere for all of these preventable injuries and death.

JD: Yes, I mean how much is enough? These companies are making billions and billions of dollars but refuse to take care of their workers. Years ago, if you had a job at the railroad, you had a job for life. Now people are leaving. Ten years on the railroad is now unheard of.

It's time we all get together and stand up for what we believe in.



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