

In virtual town hall meeting

Government, union officials invoke nationalism in response to growing supply chain crisis

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Union bureaucrats, government officials and representatives of big business are warning that the inability of US rail companies to move cargo efficiently threatens the capacity of the US government to engage in total war with Russia and China.

In a recent virtual town hall, the officials warned that the US rail transportation system was in a precarious position after roughly 30,000 rail workers at Class I railroads across the United States have either been laid off or left the industry on their own volition in the last three years, according to figures compiled by the Surface Transportation Board (STB).

In a “Virtual Freight Rail Supply Chain Roundtable” held on August 12, 2022, Martin Oberman, the chair of the STB, began the meeting warning that there were “urgent problems” with the US rail system being able to deliver freight on time due to the lack of rail workers willing to work these dangerous, underpaid jobs.

“These problems have all been precipitated by the great reduction in rail workforce over the last seven years, prior to the pandemic.” Oberman said. He continued, revealing that since 2015 the “Class I’s as a group cut 45,000 workers, about 30 percent of their workforce.” The seven Class I railroads, defined as those with revenues above \$500 million a year, form the backbone of North America’s rail infrastructure.

From February 2019 through June 2022, the STB recorded that the number of workers employed on Class I railroads in the US plummeted from 145,800 to 116,251, a 20 percent reduction.

Years of the companies imposing cutbacks and the hated Hi-Viz and Precision Railroad Scheduling system, with the assistance of the subservient trade unions, has decimated US rail workers’ health and well-being. The imposition of these entirely profit-driven scheduling systems has driven the rail infrastructure to the brink of collapse but has resulted in massive profits for the railroad companies and their wealthy shareholders.

This orgy of profiteering however, has not only exacerbated

inflation and strained thousands of rail workers to the breaking point; the union bureaucrats warned that these policies cut across the ability of the railroads to efficiently move war materiel. Rail freight is piling up on the West Coast docks, including in the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, the two largest ports in the United States.

Dean Devita, President of the National Conference of Firemen & Oilers, which is part of the Service Employees Industrial Union, lamented during the meeting that “Precision Schedule Railroading” was not even able to “provide a schedule” which was “hurting shippers … labor … the American citizen.” However, what was “really starting to worry” him, “is what will it do for our national defense?!”

Expressing most nakedly the role of the modern US trade unions, which exist not to advance the class interests of rank-and-file workers, but as labor police and middle managers that impose the dictates of their nation’s ruling class, Devita fretted, “God forbid if we need those locomotives, all in storage, put into service immediately. It will not happen.”

Control of the railroads is a critical strategic issue for war planners. The US rail network was briefly nationalized under the Woodrow Wilson administration to facilitate American imperialism’s intervention into World War I. The movement of materiel to far-flung battlefields in Ukraine and the South China Sea requires the reliable operation of the railroads, the docks and other critical infrastructure.

Devita’s comments are intended, however, to create the impression that these considerations will compel the government to intervene on behalf of workers. The exact opposite is the case. War will be used, and in fact is already being used, to justify ever larger “sacrifices” by American workers. War against Russia and China is aimed not at defending “democracy” but to defend the profit interests of American corporation against their foreign rivals, profits which are extracted through the exploitation of workers in the US and around the world.

The past year and a half has already seen an extraordinary

intervention by the Biden administration to de facto illegalize strikes through collaboration with the pro-corporate unions. It is working with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) to keep 22,000 West Coast dockworkers on the job without a contract, and has appointed a Presidential Emergency Board to block a strike on the railroads, where workers have been without a contract for nearly three years. The rail unions had been campaigning for months for Biden to intervene, effectively demanding that the government illegalize a strike by their own members.

In an interview with CBS News which aired on August 1, Port of Los Angeles Executive Director Gene Seroka warned that the inability of rail companies to hire more workers to move rail freight has left warehouses dangerously close to capacity.

There are about “35,000 containers that are designated for rail on our docks right now,” Seroka told CBS. “A normal day looks more like 9,000 units.” He warned that if the current pace continues within “another 4-6 weeks,” the warehouses would be completely full, which would then force cargo ships to wait out at sea to be unloaded.

As it stands now, Seroka estimated that the current blockages would not be cleared until 2023. “There’s so much cargo coming and not enough space.”

Seroka has been working hand in glove with Biden administration officials, including new port envoy retired Army general Stephen Lyons, and top bureaucrats with the ILWU, such as president Willie Adams, and coast committeeman Frank Ponce De Leon, to keep over 22,000 West Coast dockworkers on the job even after their contract expired on July 1.

Despite the fact that the contract has been expired for over six weeks, the ILWU has yet to hold a strike authorization vote, ceding all leverage to the Pacific Maritime Association, which reported last year that companies it represents on the ports pulled in over \$190 billion in profits. Significantly, both Biden and other administration officials have made public appearances at the Port of Los Angeles from the deck of the World War II-era battleship USS Iowa, a clear signal of the military significance of the White House’s intervention.

The pile-up at West Coast warehouses has forced BNSF and Union Pacific to divert trains back to their inland hubs to relieve congestion. Data from the Alameda Corridor Transportation Authority (ACTA) shows that since the beginning of the year, rail companies have been moving a lower percentage of containers, from 56.8 percent last year to only 40.8 percent between January and April of this year.

ACTA data shows that the number of intermodal trains coming in and out of the ports of Los Angeles-Long Beach have declined from an average of 33 a day in 2019, to only 27 per day in June 2022.

Speaking at Friday’s virtual conference, Ponce De Leon seconded Seroka’s concerns that the inability of the rail companies to pick up and move cargo in a timely manner was leading to massive delays and backups on the docks.

“Our docks are fully congested,” lamented Ponce De Leon. Boasting of his usefulness in negotiating away workers’ previously won rights without them knowing it, Ponce De Leon added, “We have actually in our contracts, we have a 24-7 365 days a year, that we do not stop any, even during our holidays and vacation time we work rails 365.”

Speaking for the bureaucracy, Ponce De Leon added, “We know how important that [24-7, 365 rail operation] is. We negotiated that. You guys here, the [Biden] administration talk about 24/7? We have always had that. Our members started throwing up the hands [in anger] when they heard the [Biden] administration say we are going 24/7, that we were doing something different; that’s not the case.”

“It is essential that we as a nation,” said Ponce De Leon, “protect the collective bargaining processes... The railroad company’s management decisions have created equipment and labor shortages that have made cargo movement more difficult at our nation’s ports.”

In the language of economic nationalism and war, Ponce De Leon ended the seminar declaring that the “success of our country,” by which he means US corporations and Wall Street, “rests in the success of its workers and not the greed of corporations that put profit before people.”

The success of humanity as a species rests in ending the capitalist system, the source of all imperialist war, poverty and inequality. American dockworkers and rail workers have more in common with their Russian, Ukrainian, and Chinese class brothers and sisters than they do with bureaucrats like Ponce De Leon, who pulled in a salary in excess of \$324,000, paid for by workers’ dues.

The urgent task workers in every industry face is the building of new organs of struggle independent of the corporate trade unions, which are tied by a thousand threads to the Democratic Party, the CIA and war. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) fights to organize workers in opposition to the nationalist labor bureaucracies and their government handlers.



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