Presidential Emergency Board ruling on railroads: The Biden administration declares war on the working class

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Tuesday's Presidential Emergency Board ruling against railroad workers is a declaration of war against the working class by the Biden administration.

Railroad workers have been without a contract for nearly three years. The White House-appointed board recommended a new deal that would keep wages below inflation, remove a cap on individual health care contributions and uphold the unilateral control by management of attendance policies.

The ruling has prompted a furious response from railroad workers, who have been pushed to the brink by brutal working schedules and wage stagnation. Unbearable conditions have driven roughly 20 percent of the workforce out of the Class I railroads since 2019, cutting expenses and driving up profit margins for the railroads, already the most profitable industry in the country.

To the provocative statement made by railroad management to the PEB that workers should have "no claim in the share in the [profits]," because record profits do not come from labor, workers have responded appropriately: Therefore management can have no objection to workers striking in defense of their interests, since corporate profits would, according to their ridiculous theory, continue unimpeded.

The ruling is an object lesson in the class character of the state, the Democratic Party and behind them, the pro-corporate trade unions.

The rail unions had campaigned for the appointment of a PEB for months, claiming to workers that Biden would intervene as a neutral arbiter to resolve the dispute, and that "national interests" might even compel him to rule in the workers' favor. Instead, Biden's PEB sided with the companies on virtually every point.

For nearly two days, the unions kept a guilty silence about the report. Thursday afternoon, SMART-TD finally issued a dishonest statement proclaiming its "disappointment" in the PEB and that it "shared" workers' "frustration." This is absurd. Whatever their lying claims to workers, the union executives cannot be surprised by the outcome, because this PEB has not acted any differently than any others in the past. Indeed, this PEB had the same chairman as the board that intervened in the national rail contract in 2011, after which the unions also had feigned "disappointment."

At the same time, SMART-TD's statement repeated lying talking points from management that the 22 percent wage increase over five years, roughly half the rate of current inflation, is the largest pay hike in decades. The aim of this statement is to shield the union executives from responsibility while they work to ram through a sellout along the lines proposed by the board.

Nearly two centuries ago, in the Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels defined the state not as a neutral body standing above society, but as a political instrument of class domination, "a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." Tuesday's ruling provides fresh proof that few "managing committees" in the world are as ruthless in the pursuit of the interests of the corporate oligarchy than the one that sits in Washington, D.C.

The president's power to appoint a PEB is provided under the Railway Labor Act (RLA), which effectively bans strikes on the railroads by smothering workers with never-ending injunctions, mandatory mediation and "cooling off periods." Since it was passed in 1926, 17 successive administrations over 96 years, both Democratic and Republican, have left the law intact and regularly used its provisions against railroaders.

The law itself was a direct response to the powerful railroad strikes that took place in the half-century that preceded its adoption. Congress was not only concerned with corralling the immense economic power of railroad workers, but, in the decade following the Russian Revolution, with suppressing a center of labor radicalism in the United States.

Many of the earlier strikes, including the Great Railway Strike of 1877 and the Pullman Strike of 1894, were led by socialists. Railroad worker and Pullman Strike leader Eugene Debs first encountered the writings of Marx in prison following the government suppression of the strike. He went on to become the most popular socialist orator and political leader of his day.

The PEB ruling is intimately connected to the reckless military provocations by American imperialism against Russia

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and China. The same week that the PEB report was issued, massive explosions rocked the Russian-claimed territory of Crimea, the product of Ukrainian operations that undoubtedly involved substantial US technical assistance.

The day after the ruling, Washington announced it was opening trade negotiations with Taiwan, which China regards as a rebel province and has said it would go to war over to prevent formal independence. In a desperate bid to shore up its world hegemony against its rivals, the American ruling class is barreling recklessly towards World War III.

No imperialist power can wage war abroad without also waging war against the working class at home. In the lead-up to every major war in modern history, the first priority of war planners has always been to secure the "home front," blocking strikes and enforcing labor discipline.

In this, the trade union officials, based on class compromise and collaboration, are lining up with "their own" ruling class in the name of "national unity." As Leon Trotsky once observed, "In time of war or revolution, when the bourgeoisie is plunged into exceptional difficulties, trade union leaders usually become bourgeois ministers."

Even before his election, Biden pledged to be the "most pro-union president in American history." He was always speaking to two audiences. On the one hand, he wanted to lead workers to believe that his administration would be partial to their interests. This rested on the false premise that the trade union apparatus, controlled by well-heeled bureaucracies sitting on tens of billions of dollars in assets and functioning as little more than industrial police, represents workers' interests, even in a limited fashion. But to the trade union bureaucracy, this was a signal that he wanted to close ranks with them in order to suppress what has become, after two years of social catastrophe unleashed by the pandemic and its political consequences, the explosive growth of social opposition.

Biden is consciously pursuing a policy of corporatism, that is, the integration of the union apparatus into management and the state. In one critical industry after another, from the West Coast docks to the refinery industry to the railroads, Biden is working with the trade union bureaucracy to block strikes, force workers to work without contracts, or impose new contracts far below the rate of inflation. Meanwhile, Biden allows profiteering without limit, fueling runaway price increases. This is to say nothing of the handling of the coronavirus pandemic, in which the ruling class has allowed more than 1 million Americans to die for the good of the "economy."

The more the ruling class rushes headlong into war to defend its interests, the more it is compelled to push the American working class to the limit, and vice versa. American workers must be made to "sacrifice" for conflicts in which they have no input, do not understand, and would not support if they did. Meanwhile, the pent-up social anger must be redirected outward to officially designated foreign adversaries, accelerating the drive to war.

A colossal showdown is being prepared, not only in the railroad industry, but around the country. Support for strike action, regardless of what the RLA or the White House says, is overwhelming. Workers feel they no longer have any other choice.

If, as seems likely at this point, workers vote down the contract proposed by the PEB, then only Congress, for now controlled by the Democrats, can intervene to prevent a strike from taking place. This would occur right before the midterm elections, setting the stage for an escalating political crisis in which the class struggle explodes into the foreground.

This movement is emerging, even in its initial stages, as a global force. There have been massive struggles around the world by workers in critical freight infrastructure, including the nationwide strikes by British rail workers and impending strikes on the British docks, dockworker strikes that have already taken place in Germany and Greece, strikes by airline workers at Ryanair, strikes by truckers in South Korea, and massive protests in Sri Lanka over the cost of living, which forced the president to flee the country.

This enormous potential power must find an independent outlet. Workers must find the means to break out of the straitjackets of the Democratic Party, anti-labor laws such as the RLA and the union bureaucracy. In the first instance, this means the formation of new organizations, rank-and-file committees, mobilizing workers independently.

A central element in this is the campaign by Will Lehman for United Auto Workers president, on a platform for the abolition of the corrupt bureaucracy and the establishment of workers' power. In a statement published on Wednesday, Lehman called for workers in the UAW, throughout the US and internationally to support the struggle of rail workers, and for rail workers to establish their own organizations as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

But above all, workers must recognize that they are locked in a life-and-death political struggle. The question is far more than workers getting their "fair share." Who makes these decisions? Who runs society? The capitalist profit interest is incompatible not only with the needs of a modern society, but even with maintaining human life and dignity. In its place, workers must fight for socialism, the democratic organization of society by the working class itself, in the interests of human need and not private gain.

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