

“The RLA needs to be destroyed”: Railroaders denounce pro-company decision by federal board, call for strike action

Our reporters
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Railroad workers: The WSWS wants to hear from you! Fill out the form at the bottom of this article to tell us what you think about the PEB's recommendations and what your “red lines” are. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Read the statement by UAW presidential candidate William Lehman calling for full support for the rail workers.

Railroaders are continuing to react furiously to a pro-company report issued Tuesday by the Presidential Emergency Board appointed to resolve a nearly three-year-long national contract dispute.

The Biden-appointed body recommended a settlement which includes annual wage increases roughly half the current rate of inflation (a 22 percent increase spread out over five years), eliminates caps to individual health care contributions, and, worst of all, upholds the “right” of management to unilaterally change its attendance policies. This is the mechanism through which the railroads have imposed hated policies such as Hi-Viz and Precision Scheduled Railroading, which have driven tens of thousands out of the industry.

Out of the more than 120-page report by the PEB, no section has incensed workers more than the arguments by the railroads to the board that “capital investment and risk are the reasons for their profits, not any contributions from labor,” and that therefore workers had no claim to share in record profits. The language from this passage has been posted widely in social media memes, printed on t-shirts and safety vests, and distributed by workers in leaflet form in break rooms. Workers know that the massive profits being made by the railroads are being sweated out of their backs, and a common retort is that the companies can therefore have no objection to a strike, since it would not affect their profit margins.

The reporting and commentary on the PEB by the *World Socialist Web Site* is being widely read by workers all over the country. Over the past three days, the WSWS has received an unprecedented volume of comments from railroad workers. Overarching themes in these comments include: an overwhelming desire for strike action, including in defiance of Congress and the Railway Labor Act; anger with the Democratic Party and the Biden administration, which claim Biden is the most “pro-union president in American history;” and anger with the unions for having called for the PEB and stumping for Biden and the Democrats. Taken as a whole, these comments reflect a powerful segment of the workforce which is being thrust into struggle, but looking for a new perspective and orientation.

We are posting a small selection of these comments below. More will be published in the coming days.

“The only winning move is a nationwide walkout”

Conductor from Idaho: “As a [high seniority] conductor, I say, STRIKE, STRIKE, STRIKE! And after Congress sends us back to work, then WILDCAT STRIKE. We are fed up!”

Worker from Upstate New York: “We need a nationwide strike, ignoring the PEB! One of the conditions for coming back to work should be its abolition!”

A Colorado BNSF worker: “I work 200-220 hours a month despite trying to work as little as possible. To that you can easily add another 150-200 hours a month sitting in hotels. Lineups are meaningless, and I'm constantly sleep deprived because there is no schedule. Even the ‘fatigue rest cycles’ offered to us don't really work for proper rest. If I get home after a 12-hour work day and take my scheduled two days off, the first thing I want to do is sleep. So I'm asleep for 8 [hours], awake 16 [hours]. Repeat that and now I'm 16 hours awake first out on the board and my phone can ring right as I'd want to go back to sleep. The entire RSIA and fatigue cycles need to be audited for the reality of what we do.

“With the new Hi-Viz policy I am under threat of termination just by getting sick for a few days. New hires don't even have vacation or PLD's to help save their points from this insane policy. As long as it's in place, I don't see anyone new to the industry being willing to stay. It already takes a special kind of person to be a railroader, but you have people with 10-15 years quitting. Why would some new guy see the current turnover and have any faith in being treated decently?”

“The only winning move I think is a nation-wide walkout of every railroader in every craft and be willing to ignore the ‘return to work order.’ The government and these CEOs and shareholders need to understand that we aren't going to put up with it anymore. In the face of the mass resignations already it's astounding that the PEB is confident that we'd be happy with a middle ground and LOSING money. The cost of living in my state has risen two to three times in the last five years and we haven't had a cost of living adjustment either, much less accounting for inflation.

“We need our ability to strike because these companies have done zero negotiating in the last 5 years. Every single thing they don't like is just paved over with a new policy ... The unions have done absolutely nothing to oppose anything in the last 5 years.”

A worker from the Texas Panhandle: “I'm tired of getting the short end of the stick every contract while the company has record profits every year! The recommendations by the PEB board are a slap

in the face, and probably came from the carriers! I vote to strike, and not to accept the board's recommendations; we are not gonna take this sub par recommendation! We work longer hours with this PSR that the railroads are doing, so in fact we will be losing money when you factor in the larger amount of time spent at work and away from our families!"

An Indiana railroader: "The RLA[Railway Labor Act] needs to be destroyed and [cost of living adjustments] need to happen every 3 months we're without a contract, to force the carriers to negotiate. Their tactic to draw the contract process out is obvious. This used to be a job where one person sacrificed his life and time for their family. It is why our wives get a pension! For the sacrifice they made! Pay us for our time!"

A Wisconsin railroader: "They [the railroads] say we work an average of 37 a pay period? Pure lies!"

"I worked [nearly 60] hours [recently], and most of the shifts were middle of the night calls, that came out of the blue. Two hours of sleep, and then going to work unexpectedly for 12 continuous hours, head bobbing all night long. How is that healthy? Fix the unpredictable work schedule. Zero scheduled days off, what kind of life is that? Yes, we all knew that this is a 24/7 operation when we hired on. But back then we had days off. There were 5/2, 7/3, or some even had a 10/5 schedules back then. The bastards took all that away from us, ZERO days off. They want us to fix and compensate for mismanagement of operation. Then throw in Hi Viz? That alone warrants a 20 percent increase in pay. Modern day slavery.

"WE STRIKE NOW, the PEB recommendation is 100% unacceptable."

"It's obvious the unions are in bed with the Democrats, and the Democrats are in bed with the railroads"

An Arizona railroader: "As usual, the politicians sided with the people who have the most influence via the almighty dollar. I work an average of 240-260 hours a month and so do a lot of my coworkers. For the corporation to say that we work less than a full time week is preposterous!"

"President Biden and the rest of the Democratic Party failed to fulfill their promise to support us. Maybe our union leaders could have presented a better case if they had bothered to come out and ride some trains to see what is really going on, instead of collecting the salaries we provide as members and sit in an office."

A Kansas railroader: "Most pro union president since FDR." What a joke! People were already leaving the railroad in droves because of the way the big railroads treat us employees. A lot of guys were hanging on to see if this contract would make it better. But once Congress shoves this poor excuse for a contract down our throats, there will be a mass walking away from the industry. Start stocking up on your essentials now, because the country is about to shut down. We've had enough of 12+ hour work days, no days off, dealing with broken equipment and all around treated like s***. I hope when Congress orders us back to work after we strike no one listens and we all stay on the picket lines. Enough is enough."

A railroader from northern Indiana: "As a 20-year-plus member of the BLE, I don't think that the unions have the best interest of the members in mind when they are negotiating. No back payment? So we

have had to work through the pandemic all while the other 'essential' workers were being paid double time and/or incentives to come to work, what did we get? Nothing. Now these companies and the unions are basically turning their backs on us. I think they are in this together and we are not getting what we pay for in union dues. Union leaders are weak and it's time for some new ones."

A railroader from the Houston, Texas area: "Though I love my job and consider myself blessed, I feel my job does not look at me as a human being. I'm treated like a piece of equipment. My humanity is denied in their decision making concerning work practices. The job itself is scientifically proven to create bad health, so why continue to chisel away at our health benefits we need to combat the medical issues our profession causes? There are times I must choose between being employed and literally being human. The raise the PEB proposed is very disappointing and will not meet the simple cost of living increase, this horrible economy and its inflation, much less the health benefits [cost] increase proposed by the company.

"I believed the false narrative that Democrats stood for the working man. I watch the Biden administration run to the rescue of so many people, countries, and assist certain agendas that the government should have no say in, yet the workforce that's literally the circulatory system of goods, products and commerce in this country gets no compassion or understanding from this 'bleeding heart' administration. I'll never vote Democrat again."

A Washington state BNSF worker: "The PEB did not agree on any sick days for us, they believed the lies the company said about being allowed to use our PLD for Doctor appointments, etc. They refused to get involved in the draconian availability policy known as Hi-Viz, they obviously believed every lie BNSF said regarding our 60 hours a week we often work vs the 32 hours they claim that we work. We once were considered essential and now considered worthless. I will never ever believe again that Democrats are for working employees. They sided with the company on damn near everything!"

A Seattle, Washington BNSF worker: "I work in south Seattle, management treats us worse than dogs. They force us to work 12 hour days without a break in 100 degree weather. They preach safety non stop, but really only care about production. Consistently we have over 1,000 pieces in the yard when we only have parking for 700. This is by far the worst company I've ever worked for in my entire life.

"This PEB is 100 percent in favor for the company. Why do we spend so much for union dues, when its obvious that the union is in bed with the Democrats, and the Democrats are in bed with the railroad? This whole thing is just the rich helping out the rich."



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