

“We’re at an unheard of level of solidarity to strike”—Letter from a US railroader

A Railroader
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The World Socialist Web Site received the following letter from a railroader which we are publishing in full. The letter explains the situation in the industry now that a Biden-appointed Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) issued a report siding with the railroads. Last Tuesday, the PEB proposed a deal which contains wage increases below inflation, removes caps on individual contributions to health care and leaves intact management’s “right” to unilaterally impose hated attendance policies, such as Hi Viz and Precision Scheduled Railroading.

The ruling is provoking outrage among railroaders across the country. There is overwhelming support for strike action, which could legally come as soon as September 15, when the current 30-day cooling off period expires. This would precipitate a conflict not only with railroad management but the Biden administration and Congress, who will likely intervene to prevent or shut down a strike, as well as the corrupt, pro-Democratic Party trade union bureaucracy.

Hundreds of railroaders have contacted the WSWs over the past week with their thoughts about the PEB ruling and the potential for strike action. Add your voice to theirs! Contact us by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All comments will be kept anonymous. We will continue to publish statements from workers in the coming days.

“I can’t understate how much anger and hostility we feel”

“I have many concerns about everything happening with the PEB right now. We got a union email that simplified it, but part of what stuck out to me the most was that it said, ‘this is the best offering we’ve had in 47 years.’ It just shows that for decades we’ve been getting the short end of the stick, and we’re expected to be grateful for when things go slightly in our favor. I’ll try to keep the cursing out of this, but I can’t really understate how much anger and hostility myself and many of my coworkers express daily.

“I can’t remember the exact numbers, but I’ve read that in the time our pay has gone up 23 percent [while] the carriers have seen profits up like 600 or 1,100 percent. Meanwhile they’ve cut jobs like the U-man, which used to help expedite yard moves and could help out crews, so you didn’t have one guy doing all the work. We didn’t get a pay raise for them removing that job or any of the other 15 or so two- to three-man crew jobs in my terminal alone in the last 10 years.

“The last five years with PSR have been especially bad. The company claimed during the [Surface Transportation Board] hearings that most of us only work 34- to 37-hour work weeks. It’s an outright lie. I attached a picture of the 276 hour monthly limit times for my board right now. With 11 days left in the month I count 18 people who are already close to the “regular” 160-hour work month. Two notable guys are already over 160 hours. This doesn’t even include the 200-plus hours a month we spend sitting in hotels waiting to come back home. Anyone below 100 hours was almost certainly on a week of vacation or bump board. It’s the same story everywhere.

“The STB hearing was sickening, because every railroader watching it understood just how much of it was outrageous lies, when each rail carrier presented their case. All the while, the railroad releases a video about us being safety-oriented first and foremost. I could list half a dozen different ways they make my job unsafe because it would cost money to actually fix the problems.

“Lineups are a major issue. I’ve seen trains projected to get called when they’re still 240 miles away. Then those trains go red and never get removed/changed from the lineup so every other projection becomes meaningless. But it would cost money to employ competent managers to look and update the lineups and make decisions. Cutting jobs makes one person do more work. Many trains do work in the middle of the night when all you have is a battery lantern. I understand the railroad is a 24/7 operation, but clearly they don’t care about cars being delayed. I was recently called for a train that had been sitting for 10 days. At 2am. At a location I had never been to. What’s another 4 hours for daylight at that point? The railroad doesn’t care.

“If union leaders aren’t willing to fight, then they need to step down from their cushy retirement jobs”

“Railroaders should be using this opportunity to demand a hell of a lot more than we are. The union leaders requesting 32 percent or whatever are really far off the mark to make up for the last 5 decades of getting repeatedly screwed. The company doesn’t negotiate. Every time they don’t like something, they make a policy. They whine that there is a crew shortage during holidays. Instead of paying guys a decent bonus to BE here on holidays, it’s much cheaper for them to write a paragraph and threaten termination for taking holidays off. That’s exactly what they did. It’s pathetic.

“I talked to a coworker earlier today about the possibility of a strike. If our union leaders aren’t willing to fight and risk being arrested for

standing up against these companies, then maybe they need to step down from their cushy retirement jobs. Right now with the state of the country at record inflation and constant news stories of unionizing, union busting, and people demanding to be paid a living wage; if we aren't willing to fight for what's right and deserved now, then when will we ever?

"Our unions at a local level, i.e., the guys actually on the ground working the same road/yard jobs as conductors and engineers, usually seem to be decent about helping and fighting for their members. Unfortunately there is a divide because many of the union leaders, who always seem to have petty pissing matches between each other and try to get what's best for their own group.

"Then there is also this divide between conductors and engineers because we are different unions. Namely, UTU (United Transportation Union) [which merged with the sheet metal workers' union to become SMART-TD (Sheet Metal Air Rail & Transportation-Transportation Division) in 2014] and BLET (Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen). So for example, in my terminal, there are 6 different union leaders that all represent different groups of people. The company loves watching us fight with each other and squabble over small things. Years ago there were discussions about combining all the unions into one, but then you have the mid-level union leaders that didn't want to give up their high-salaried jobs. Combining into one union effectively means we only need one leader instead of 6.

"Now getting to the larger problem, the upper echelons in the union seem to be widely regarded as just another part of a corporate business model. After all, you have thousands of ground employees paying union dues to a few elites at the top. Sounds rather familiar to the structure of the railroad. And like any upper-level manager, the highest union leaders seem to be somewhat disconnected from the reality down here on the ground. Not as mindlessly as railroad executives, but I'd bet most of the top union leaders haven't been on a train or worked a 24/7 schedule in 10-15 years. Their salaries are also quite high so they have an incentive to protect themselves, their money, their families, rather than do the job they're in place to do: PROTECT AND FIGHT for all of the people that pay them.

"We should be fighting for so much more"

"I think the PEB actually kind of did side with the unions on this one, but that's a red flag about the state of the country and economy as a whole. There has been a precedent for over a hundred years where the railroad has steadily and insistently cut works, cut jobs, cut costs. Every time we've had to go to a PEB or arbitration or tried to sue the company, we lose. It's nothing new. So when we go and finally kind of sort of 'win' in this last PEB because it's better than anything we've had before, it misses the mark because there are decades worth of getting consistently screwed to make up for, and the PEB/union is only presenting evidence for the last 3 years. I haven't seen a single thing about the railroad get better in 10 years. My coworkers who have been here for 20+ repeatedly say, 'I was told when I hired on that this is the best it's ever going to be. It only gets worse from here.' That statement has held true. We've never truly gained anything substantial to help our working conditions or lifestyles.

"Every coworker I've talked to about a strike has seemed fairly excited about it. We all laugh in a sadistic kind of way about how bad

it's going to be. We know we can't be replaced. They can't come arrest 10,000 workers. We already have a crew shortage. That much was made clear by the STB hearing and how many people have quit since then. You can't stick some random guy on a train and have them run it. These computer systems in place that automatically run trains aren't flawless, and they're not even implemented entirely across the rail network. I can't believe how many times I've had an engineer looking at their computer screen with Trip Optimizer running and ask out loud, "What the actual hell are you doing?" I've had one notable moment when the computer went into dynamic brakes going up a 2 percent grade. That is where you'd want to be full power, and it was setting brakes. It's laughable, and the company wants to use those systems to justify removing the conductor right now.

"We voted 99.5 percent yes to strike. We are at an unheard of level of solidarity with willingness to go on strike. I think the irony is that thanks to Hi Viz and not being able to take time off work, the guys who are still working have been able to save up more money than before as a little nest egg if somehow the strike went on for an extended time. But the railroads stated themselves during a court hearing that a strike would cause irreparable harm to the economy. They're terrified of us striking because it would mean they'd be on the receiving end of what they've done for DECADES: Unilaterally get all of their demands.

"I say we should be looking at much more than just a pay raise. Personally I want 40 percent or more, I want more pay for our time spent sitting in hotels just waiting, I want more vacation weeks that you can earn earlier in your career instead of 25 years, I want all of the jobs like the U-man reinstated with protections, I want the removal of Hi Viz or any changes to our attendance policy like this ever again. I want there to be penalties for the company denying our special claims for performing work outside the scope of our agreements; penalties such as declined claims being paid with interest. We should be fighting for SO much more than what is even in this PEB. Because as the next couple decades drag on, the company is going to get right to work with continuing down this pathetic path of PSR and making our lives miserable."



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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