US rail unions in damage control mode as railroaders press for strike action after pro-company federal intervention

Tom Hall
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Hundreds of railroaders have contacted the WSWS 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.

Since the release of the Presidential Emergency Board's recommendations for a national contract for 100,000 US railroaders, the rail unions have been in full damage control mode.

The unions are seeking to contain and suppress the overwhelming opposition from the membership to the Biden-appointed board's proposals for a five-year deal, including wage increases below inflation, the elimination of caps to individual healthcare contributions, and no changes to the punishing attendance policies that have driven tens of thousands out of the industry.

Support is growing for a national strike, which could legally begin as soon as September 15. One railroader wrote to the WSWS, "The unions are a joke, and through the PEB, the majority Democratic Congress and President have insulted labor after gaining office in the last elections on the union vote."

He concluded, "A strike by all rail labor is what's needed. The carriers can't hire anyone now—who will stay? The carriers are making America hurt already by not moving freight because they don't have the crews. The compensation for the sacrifice and work that's done by labor is a travesty, as proven by the hiring failures. The PEB recommendation is even more of a travesty. STRIKE."

Another wrote, "These greedy bastards are living high on the hog, while we are missing special days with our families and sacrificing our comfort to make this railroad run on no days off and not enough sleep. There is a special place in Hell for people like this. We deserve a good raise and more, way more. To hell with them, let's shut them down!"

Such a strike, or even preparations for one, would rapidly develop into a showdown between railroad workers and Congress, which would almost certainly intervene to try to block it. The Biden administration, the self-described "most pro-union president in American history," has made preventing work stoppages in the supply chain one of his top domestic priorities, which he has been carrying out with the assistance of the pro-corporate union bureaucracy.

Since the last contract expired nearly three years ago, the rail unions have played the role of enforcer and publicist for the government interventions under the anti-worker Railway Labor Act, which all but blocks strike action through endless rounds of mandatory mediation and endless "cooling off" periods.

The unions worked to block strike action, aggressively enforcing court injunctions, and even campaigned for the appointment of a PEB, claiming that Biden's intervention would be that of a neutral arbiter. Now that the PEB's report has been released, however, the unions are desperate to find some way to overcome the opposition from railroaders and ram through a deal along the lines of the board's recommendations.

The Brotherhood Of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen has not even issued an official response to the PEB ruling, nearly two weeks after the fact. However, it has been publishing a series of self-serving "myths versus facts" graphics on the ruling on its Facebook page, regurgitating corporate talking points under the guise of "objectivity."

For example, one graphic describes as a "myth" the statement, "24% compounded GWIs over 5 years is weak." In response, the BLET writes, "Factually speaking, the PEB's recommendation would provide the highest percentage of wage increases we have seen in more than 47 years." This "fact" downplays the reality that the deal will not keep pace with inflation, which is also the highest in four decades. It is lifted virtually word for word from the press release on the PEB issued from the industry group the Association of American Railroads, a claim repeated endlessly in the corporate press.

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In the same graphic, the BLET also claims as a "myth" that these wage increases "don't even come close to keeping up with inflation." In fact, the BLET responds, the wage increases, which are retroactive to 2020, do keep pace – with inflation in 2020! Wage increases for 2021 and 2022, the BLET admits, are "slightly below" inflation for those years.

It then adds, "The PEB also notes that their recommendations for 2023 and 2024 are 'slightly higher than the projected amounts of inflation'" for those years. In reality, the wage increases for those years are 4 and 4.5 percent, respectively. The "projections," in other words, assume that inflation will rapidly drop by half in the coming months. This is not only a self-serving assumption, it is also possible that inflation could *increase* over the same period, given the incredibly volatile economic environment. At any rate, with no cost of living adjustments built into the proposal, workers would be at the mercy of the ebb and flow of consumer prices.

Other so-called "myths" cited by the BLET include, "The PEB didn't give the unions anything we wanted!," "The PEB did essentially nothing to address our quality of life!" and, most revealingly, "The PEB's terms are final and binding! It's time to go on strike!"

Significantly, the BLET turned off commenting for these posts. However, workers expressed their anger and frustration with the graphics in one popular railroaders' Facebook group. One worker said, "Notice they turned off commenting in the original post! POLITICIAN-WORSHIPING, BOSS-LOVING SELLOUTS!!! Take control of your lodges, branches and offices. Put charges on these enemies of democracy. Do what needs to be done to save your lives and your jobs! It's 1877 all over again!" – in reference to the Great Railway Strike, the first major national strike in American history.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU), another rail union involved in national talks, issued an open letter to the president of another union in the national bargaining coalition, which stated, "Over the past few days, the BRC/TCU/IAM has made us aware of several potential tentative agreements which would implement the recommendations from Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) 250 on the freight railroads." These proposals, however, have not been made public to the membership. The TWU declared in the letter that it was "strongly opposed to presenting these to the membership for ratification," and indicated that it intended to block these proposals. The letter indicates that there may be serious divisions within the bureaucracy itself over how best to proceed.

However, the solution which the TWU offers is not to prepare for strike action, but to "continue negotiations: "Signing any tentative agreement now, while we continue to believe rational reasonable additions can be made, would be irresponsible," the letter states.

In other words, the TWU, which describes itself in its letterhead as "America's fighting democratic union," is proposing instead for the unions to bide their time and load the contract with enough fig leafs in order to push it past the workers. The TWU, it should be noted, has pushed through one concessions contract after another on the New York Subway, its largest local by far, and has kept subway workers on the job even as dozens were dying of covid.

The most insidious response, however, comes from the Transportation Division of the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART-TD). In recent days, SMART-TD has sent out a "random" electronic survey to members, which it claims is "100 percent confidential," asking them which popular, independently-administered Facebook groups they frequent. These groups serve as relatively open discussion forms, largely free from the control of the union apparatus, and have been a thorn in the side of the bureaucracy for years.

The unusual survey was clearly understood by railroaders on social media that the unions intend to move against the groups in some form or another. "[That group] should be kept a sanctuary," one worker said. "[We have] inward facing cameras [in the locomotives] already, don't give them your trash talking outlet. This is ridiculous. It's NO ONES business where you talk or what about. This is America, NOT North Korea." Another observed, "Definitely a trap. It's sad when you can't trust your own union because the leadership is in bed with the Carriers."

The bureaucracy's machinations shows that workers need to organize themselves to prepare for a war on three fronts–against the railroads, the government and Congress, and the trade union apparatus. This means the formation of independent rank-and-file committees across all seven Class I carriers to campaign for a rejection of any agreement based on the PEB, to prepare for strike action and build up the broadest possible support for the railroaders in the working class.

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