

Unions announce first tentative agreements with US railroads, as bureaucracy employs divide-and-conquer strategy

Tom Hall**29 August 2022**

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Three railroad unions under the umbrella of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) announced tentative agreements with the Class I railroads Monday afternoon, the first deals patterned after the hated Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) report.

The federal panel recommended wage increases of 22 percent over five years, or roughly half the current rate of inflation, the elimination of caps to individual contributions to health care and no change to management's "right" to unilaterally implement punishing attendance policies such as Precision Scheduled Railroading and Hi-Viz, which have driven tens of thousands out of the workforce.

The deals cover 15,000 workers, out of a total industry workforce of roughly 100,000. These are members of IAM District 19, the Transportation Communications Union (TCU/IAM) and the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen.

The deal was reached in defiance of the overwhelming sentiment among the rank and file for strike action. Workers are incensed that the Biden-appointed PEB's report does not come close to meeting their demands.

Workers are also furious with the trade union bureaucracy, which openly campaigned for Biden to intervene and appoint a PEB. This was effectively a demand that the White House intervene to block strike action by their own members, as the PEB's appointment and subsequent report triggered two 30-day "cooling off" periods, the second of which expires September 15. After that, workers will finally be able to legally strike, but Congress is almost certain to intervene in a bid to either prevent or shut down a strike.

Railroaders, however, are prepared to face off not only with the railroad companies but, if necessary, with Congress and the White House.

The announcement of tentative agreements that workers did not want and did not ask for is fresh proof of the need for railroaders to organize themselves independently, and in

opposition to the corrupt union bureaucracy.

What are called the "unions" are in fact working deliberately to disrupt workers' unity, prevent strikes and ram through the dictates of management and the Biden administration. To fight this, workers must form a network of rank-and-file committees, striving to unite railroaders across all of the unions and all seven Class I railroads, in order to send the PEB report into the garbage and force strike action.

The announcement of agreements for only a part of the workforce is a divide-and-conquer strategy on the part of the unions, which are desperate to prevent strike action. By trying to ram through contracts one at a time, the union apparatus is aiming to disrupt the unity of workers, demoralize and discourage them and present the contract as a *fait accompli*.

Moreover, in the event that the IAM-affiliated unions vote, under duress, to accept the contract, but workers in other unions go on strike, the IAM would then force its 15,000 members to cross the picket line and act as scabs.

One of the principal means through which the IAM is seeking to ease passage of the deal is through a so-called "me too clause," under which any better deal reached by another rail union would be automatically matched. However, in trying to sap the unity of workers across the railroad industry by pushing through this contract, the IAM is undermining the only means through which better terms could be forced out of the railroads: through a determined, unified struggle.

Monday's announcement provoked an angry response from railroaders, who viewed the tentative agreement as a betrayal aimed at disrupting the unity of railroaders against the PEB recommendations. "[The contract is] taking the cap off healthcare, and inflation eats up any increase in wages," one worker told the WSWS. "Those three unions caved and added a 'me too' provision that will alienate the ranks."

The "me too" clause has particularly incensed workers on social media, who rightly see it as an attempt to peel off the IAM workers from the rest of the workforce. As one worker summed it up, the IAM's position is to tell the workers to "take the PEB recommendation and let the rest of the [workers] fight the fight." Another said, "They only got a 'me too' clause

because the railroads aren't going to give anything better [to the other unions] and they know it."

"Just vote no!" another worker urged. "Look at John Deere just one year ago, [they] shot down [the] first 2 agreements that went to their membership and ended up with a good working man's agreement."

The IAM statement announcing the deal uses talking points straight out of the railroads' press releases and the corporate press.

It claims that the deal includes "**the highest general wage increases (GWIs) ever achieved through National Freight Bargaining** [emphasis in original]," a statement which ignores record-setting inflation. It ends with the absurd statement, "Your IAM Rail Division knows the TA's would not have been possible without all of Rail Labor standing together ... We fought side by side against the carriers' attack on wages and healthcare benefits. We stood together and pushed back against work rule changes that would have affected every rail union member. Our solidarity has resulted in a truly historic victory for IAM Rail Division members and every rail worker."

In reality, the union bureaucracy fought side by side with management and the PEB to keep workers on the job and ram through a sellout.

The two largest rail unions, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) and the Transportation Division of the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART-TD), issued a statement Saturday that talks the previous week had failed to produce "tentative agreement language that operating crafts would accept, or that could be presented to our members for ratification."

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) also published an unusual public letter last week, declaring its opposition to the tentative agreements under discussion at the IAM. It ended by reminding the latter that a 1998 agreement between the two unions to conduct joint negotiations requires the consent of the TWU before a deal can be presented for a vote. It is not clear as of this writing whether the IAM simply violated this agreement by bringing the deal to a vote, or if the TWU rescinded its opposition.

However, the IAM deals suggest that similar agreements may not be far off at the other unions, and that they are simply biding their time. All of the unions have been in damage control mode since the PEB report was released, with BLEL publishing "fact sheets" playing up the recommendations in language similar to the IAM's in Monday's announcement. SMART-TD also sent out an extraordinary survey recently asking workers about their social media activity, suggesting the union is preparing a crackdown on Facebook groups and other avenues of discussion not completely controlled by the bureaucracy.

Their efforts are being coordinated with the highest levels of the state, including the White House and Biden himself. The so-

called "most pro-union administration in American history" is in fact using the services of the unions to block strikes and enforce substandard contracts in critical industries. In addition to the railroads, Biden has been heavily involved in other contract talks, including among refinery workers, where the union president met personally with Biden before ramming through an agreement which the union itself boasted did not contribute to inflation, and on the West Coast docks, where 22,000 have been kept on the job without a contract for nearly two months by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union.

While the railroads expressed contempt for workers in inflammatory testimony to the PEB that labor "does not contribute" to their profits, this was contradicted by a press release Monday from the bargaining coalition the National Carriers' Conference Committee (NCCC), which declared: "It is critical for all stakeholders – including customers, employees, and the public – that all parties promptly resolve the negotiations and prevent service disruptions. Accordingly, we look forward to additional discussions with the unions that have not yet reached tentative agreements and will continue seeking voluntary agreements based on the PEB's recommendations."

This statement nervously acknowledges the truth: Not only do workers create all the wealth, they hold all the cards. A national rail strike would have a massive impact, not only on the profit margins of all of corporate America, but also on the war plans of US imperialism, which requires the railroads to move materiel to battlefields in eastern Europe and Asia. But most importantly, a rail strike would have a galvanizing effect on workers across the US and around the world, who are fighting against essentially the same issues as railroaders. The entry of railroaders into struggle would have the potential to trigger a massive strike wave all over the country.

However, what is required is that railroaders organize themselves to defeat the union bureaucracy's attempts to disrupt and discourage them and to launch a counteroffensive to force strike action. This means the formation of rank-and-file committees. The experiences last year at Volvo Trucks and John Deere, where rank-and-file committees played a central role in defeating the United Auto Workers' attempts to block a strike, show that this can be done.

The *World Socialist Web Site* stands ready to assist workers in building rank-and-file committees. For more information, contact us by filling out the form below:



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