

Build the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee to fight for a national railroad strike!

The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee
1 September 2022

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On Thursday afternoon, railroaders from around the United States met online to found the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. In a wide-ranging discussion, railroaders reviewed the situation following the publication of last month's Presidential Emergency Board report, which sided with the railroads in a proposed settlement to a nearly three-year national contract dispute. Among workers in general, there is unanimous opposition to the deal from workers and support for a nationwide strike once a legally-mandated "cooling off period" expires September 15. However, the rail unions, who promoted the Biden administration's PEB, are seeking to ram through contracts modeled after the PEB report.

Workers discussed the need for independent action to unite rank-and-file railroad workers for strike action and to oppose the PEB and further intervention by the Biden administration or Congress. They also discussed the need for the broadest possible unity with workers from other industries fighting similar conditions. A delegate from the West Coast ports attended and spoke. Dockworkers have been kept on the job for two months since their contract expired without even a formal extension by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, which is coordinating its activities closely with the White House.

At the end of the meeting, the committee unanimously voted to pass a founding statement, which is posted below, and to circulate it as widely as possible among railroad workers. To join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email railwrfc@gmail.com. Alternatively, fill out the form at the bottom of this article and the World Socialist Web Site can put you in touch with the committee.

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Brothers and sisters,

We, the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, call on our co-workers at all Class I railroads across the country to organize now to prepare for strike action. The Presidential Emergency Board's report is a slap in the face, which fails to meet a single one of our demands.

Despite claims by the railroads and the unions that the 22 percent wage increase, spread out over five years, is "historic," it is barely half the current rate of inflation. The proposal removes caps on individual health care costs. We still have no sick days. Worst of

all, it maintains the unilateral attendance policies which have driven tens of thousands of our co-workers out of the industry.

Not a single brother or sister can be found who supports this deal. They are not only furious at the PEB, but at the unions for having promoted it as a solution to all of our problems. They told us the PEB would intervene as a neutral arbiter. But the previous 249 PEB's all sided with the company, and now so has the 250th. Now, the International Association of Machinists has issued the first deals patterned after the report, with a scab "me too" clause to try and grease the contract's passage. No one wanted this and no one asked for it.

It must be said openly and clearly: The unions have every intention to block a strike. BLET members voted 99.5 percent over the summer to authorize strike action. But the BLET and the other rail unions have done exactly the opposite of what we demanded with one voice. Therefore, we must organize ourselves independently to prepare and *force* a strike. The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee has been founded to prepare a unified fight.

Our first, and most central demand, is this: **On 12:01 AM, September 16—the instant that the final "cooling off period" expires—nationwide walkouts across all Class I railroads must begin.** If we are to reverse decades of declining conditions, there's only one way to do it: by using our strength to fight for it.

The railroads claim that "labor does not contribute to profits." But let us go out on strike and see how long corporate profits at both the railroads and the country hold up.

We have no choice but to fight. This is not about what we want, it is about survival. It is impossible to live this way, on call constantly, with one day off a month, operating three-mile-long trains on only a couple of hours a sleep, missing time with our spouses and children. Tens of thousands have gotten fed up and left already. The railroads welcome this so they can save money piling work on the crews who are left. It also gives them ammunition for their campaign to move to one-person crews.

We must never underestimate the ruthlessness of the union bureaucracy, but experience shows that workers can defeat them. Workers at Volvo Trucks last year formed a rank-and-file committee that was central in organizing the defeat of three successive sellout contracts from the United Auto Workers and forcing a month-long strike. This was repeated again at John Deere

the following fall, where a committee helped force a strike and defeated two sellouts.

We call on all our brothers and sisters, regardless of union or railroad or job classification, to join us in building this committee as a network embracing workers across the entire industry. We intend to build this committee to put the power into the hands of the rank and file, in order to prevent the unions' sabotage of our struggle. It will be a means of communication for working out strategy and joint actions outside of the control or the prying eyes of scab union bureaucrats and corporate stoop pigeons, and of appealing for the widest possible support from workers across the country and around the world. This will put us in the most powerful possible position to defeat any attempts at injunctions, management retaliation and other strikebreaking measures.

To organize common action, we propose to our coworkers that we take up the following 10-point program:

- An immediate 50 percent wage increase to make up for years of declining wages, *plus* cost of living adjustments;
- No change to existing health care plans;
- An end to Hi Viz, Precision Scheduled Railroading and all other brutal attendance policies;
- An end to 24/7 on-call status and a guaranteed 40 hour workweek;
- Guaranteed time off and sick days;
- A hiring campaign to restore tens of thousands of lost jobs and end overwork, with wages and benefits capable of attracting and keeping qualified workers;
- An end to "super-pools" which send crews on unfamiliar and dangerous new routes;
- Full transparency on the spread of coronavirus, including regular testing and immediate public reporting of cases. Workers infected or exposed must be given two full weeks to quarantine, with full pay;
- An end to the push for one-man crews, with written guarantees to preserve two-man crews, and;
- The repeal of the Railway Labor Act, and the restoration of railroaders' democratic right to strike without endless bureaucratic hoops to jump through.

To this, we add a supplemental demand directed to the rail unions: **they must immediately stop their campaign to push through contracts modeled after the PEB!** We voted by 99.5 percent to strike. In pushing the PEB's terms, they speak only for themselves; they have no authorization whatever from the rank and file. No more contracts patterned after the PEB should be announced. Those which have already been brought forward by the IAM and its affiliates must not be subject to endless delays. They must either be immediately brought to a vote—so they can be overwhelmingly rejected before September 15—or withdrawn entirely.

Union officials will no doubt attempt to scare us by saying that Congress will intervene against a strike. It is certainly true that Congress will try to issue an injunction. But that only exposes the complete bankruptcy of the unions' orientation towards the government, the Democratic Party and the Biden administration. Biden, the so-called most "pro-union president in American history," is using the union bureaucracies to suppress strikes and

force through garbage contracts, especially in critical infrastructure. He has already worked out a sub-inflation oil refinery contract with the United Steelworkers and is working with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union to keep dockworkers on the West Coast on the job two months after their contract expired.

This shows we are in a fight not just against the railroads but against an entire political system controlled by the corporate oligarchy. But we are more powerful than any Congress. Many times throughout history, workers have gone toe-to-toe with the courts, Congress and even the White House and defeated attempts to impose injunctions. That can happen again. It depends not only on organizing ourselves independently to ensure maximum unity and solidarity, but also that we hold no illusions in the bought-and-paid-for political stooges of Wall Street.

Our strength lies not in the pretended support of the Democrats, but the real and powerful support from the working class. We must appeal for support from the dockworkers, the refinery workers, the tens of millions of workers around the country who are fighting against the same things as us. If we make a stand, workers will see us as the tip of the spear for a broad counteroffensive. This is exactly what Congress is afraid of, and why Biden, the railroads and their union accomplices are trying to keep us on the job: if a crack appears anywhere, then the whole dam is liable to break.

We are part of a world movement. Not only are railroad workers in Canada fighting against a sellout contract at Canadian Pacific; strikes and protests are happening all over the globe. In Britain, railroad workers carried out nationwide strikes this summer for the first time in decades, followed by powerful strikes in the docks. More and more, workers are fighting in defiance of governments. In Sri Lanka, protests by hundreds of thousands of workers against the cost of living forced the resignation of that country's president. Washington is terrified of our struggle because they know it could usher in a similar movement in the United States.

Workers around the world are also building rank-and-file committees to fight against the trade union bureaucracies which are selling out their struggles. This is why the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees was formed, to coordinate action on a world scale. The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee will participate in the IWA-RFC and appeal for support and unity with railroaders worldwide, including in Canada, Britain and other countries.

If you agree with us, then join us. Join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee and help build it in your area. Help distribute our statements and discuss with us what you want to be fighting for. For more information, contact us by emailing railwrfc@gmail.com.



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