

Two more rail unions announce sellout deals, as railroaders continue to demand strike action

Railroad engineer: “They think they are untouchable because they have all the money. The only thing that will change their mind is if we go on strike. We got nothing to lose.”

Jacob Crosse, Tom Hall
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Take up the fight against the union sellouts and force strike action! Join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee by emailing railwrfc@gmail.com or by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept confidential.

On Friday, two more rail unions with 6,000 total members announced tentative agreements patterned after the wildly unpopular, pro-corporate contract proposals issued by the Biden-appointed Presidential Emergency Board (PEB). Earlier this week, the International Association of Machinists (IAM) and two affiliated unions announced three separate contracts, also patterned after the PEB.

These deals are in flagrant violation of the near-unanimous sentiment of railroaders for a national strike and the rejection of the PEB’s settlement, which includes wage increases half the rate of inflation, an elimination of caps on individual health care contributions and no change to the hated attendance policies which chain workers to their jobs 24/7. They had no authorization from the rank and file even to negotiate along the PEB’s terms.

Friday’s announcements took place soon after the publication of the founding statement of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, an independent group of railroaders founded to oppose the unions’ betrayals of their struggle. That statement called for an immediate end to all negotiations and called for the rank and file to organize independently to fight for their own demands and to force a strike once the “cooling off period” expires on September 16.

The two unions who announced deals Friday were the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and the American Train Dispatchers Association (ATDA). Significantly, ATDA members had earlier voted by 99 percent to authorize strike action.

In a statement announcing the deal and encouraging its ratification, IBEW President Lonnie Stephenson said, “I also want to acknowledge President Biden and the members of the PEB for their efforts to bring management and labor together to negotiate a fair contract. It’s been a long and tough process, but we’ve finally reached an agreement that achieves more than 70% of what we were asking for, including historic wage gains for our railroad members.” In fact, the deals include practically nothing of what workers wanted. He added, “The freight rail industry is crucial to our economy, and the men and women who keep it moving deserve a fair deal. We didn’t win everything we wanted, but this

agreement is a step in the right direction, and we recommend members support it.”

Stephenson’s references to Biden and the “crucial” role of the railroads to the economy are significant. The Biden administration, which fashions itself as the “most pro-union president in American history,” is using the services of the unions to prevent strikes and enforce substandard contracts in critical industries. It is also working with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) to keep 22,000 West Coast dockworkers on the job more than two months after their contract expired.

An IAM member told the WSWs, “[The IBEW deal] is a carbon copy of the PEB. And worst of all they agreed to extend the cool off period for their members until Sept 28.

“It sounds like most of the crafts have PEB TAs out to their members. My union, the IAM, will be voting electronically next week, with a deadline of September 13 for the votes. Our cool off [expiration] remains at September 15 midnight. Also, my District general chair, Kyle Loos is coming to my shop for 2 days to help push the contract. He is the lead negotiator for IAM District 19, which represents the railroad machinists.”

The WSWs has said that the unions’ strategy is to “divide and conquer” by forcing workers to vote separately, union by union, in order to isolate them and browbeat them into accepting a deal. This was essentially admitted to be correct in an extraordinarily defensive and nervous joint Labor Day statement by the engineers’ and conductors’ unions, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Trainmen (BLET) and the Transportation Division of the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART-TD).

The statement declared: “It is ... clear that BLET and SMART-TD have been carved out from the rest of Rail Labor as we were the only Unions that the Carriers insisted upon work rule changes from throughout the PEB hearing.” Significantly, it also said that workers should “not fault the [other] Unions” because “all of our contracts will soon be settled, one way or the other.” In other words, they admit that they also have no intention of calling a strike and are simply biding their time before announcing their own deals.

The situation is urgent. More than ever, railroaders need to organize independently, uniting the rank and file across all the unions and all the railroads in order to defeat this sellout campaign and force strike action. They must also build up the broadest possible support and unity with

workers around the country to prepare themselves for the inevitable showdown with Congress, which will attempt to shut down a strike by issuing an injunction. This is what the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee is fighting for.

“We have nothing to lose”: Railroad engineer describes unsafe working conditions, demands strike action

The WSWS spoke with a railroad engineer Thursday night on the conditions at his workplace, the role of the union bureaucracy and the need for strike action. This interview has been edited for content and clarity. His name has also been changed to protect his identity.

WSWS: What do you do?

John: I am an engineer, an RCO, that is, a remote control operator. I stay in the rail yard, work on the ground. I like getting the exercise, it helps me stay in shape. Over an 8- to 12-hour shift, I am walking anywhere from one to five miles a day. It is a good workout, climbing on and off rail cars, getting some exercise, getting my blood circulating. It's better than sitting in the seat.

WSWS: How long have you been working on the railroad?

John: I have been with the railroad for 30 years, I am [almost 50]. I am at the period in my life where I am kind of stuck, I only know how to do railroad. Even though I have been with the company for 30 years, I can't retire until I am 60.

WSWS: So you have to give four decades of your life to the company before you can retire?

John: Yeah. ... When I was first hired out, it was with Sante Fe, this was before they merged with BNSF. It wasn't so bad then. It was a good job. I was able to work while my wife stayed home.

After the merger and especially after Warren Buffett took over, that's when the cuts really began. They began to cut back on personnel, labor, electricians, inspectors, pretty much everything, especially inspections. They don't do any, well, they barely do any inspections.

The truth is, the rail carriers, they don't care about safety. There are so many things that we should inspect, but they only have us inspect the train once.

WSWS: It's more profitable for the railroads to pay out the occasional settlement than to actually run a safe operation.

John: Absolutely. They are constantly rolling the dice with safety. They don't care, they figure if something goes wrong, they will fight it out in the courts and at most pay a settlement. There are a lot of close calls, a lot of injuries because of cutting back on inspections. It's a big railroad. They figure every so often they'll have to pay out, but it's worth it to keep rolling the dice for them; it's not like they are out here.

What's funny, in spite of all the cutbacks, we are top-heavy with managers. No management has been cut. Some of these managers, in my yard, they have this schedule, it's three days on, three days off. They make \$112,000, working six months a year.

Meanwhile, the average yard employee is making \$70,000. Rumor is that if the PEB recommendations go through, these managers, with their six-figure salaries working half of the year, will be getting a 25 percent raise.

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WSWS: While managers are working half the year, “essential” workers like yourself have been working throughout the pandemic. Can you talk a bit about what your experience has been since March 2020? How much information about the virus did the carrier and union relay to you? Did they discuss how COVID-19 is airborne; have they been passing out

masks?

John: When it first hit, we had to fight with the carrier for just basic cleaning supplies. They said they were in “short supply, high demand.” We have a company, PACE, a contractor, that cleans the facilities. They come out three times a week, which is not nearly enough. It is all about trying to save money, cut expenses wherever they can. I argued that with a pandemic, we needed to be cleaning more, not less.

We couldn't even get masks and disinfectant wipes. I have been advocating for masks since the beginning. You can catch the virus through your eyes, it's airborne.

When railroad workers started to go out, started getting sick, Governor Newsom passed a law saying that if you were sick with COVID-19 you could stay home for two weeks and get paid. All of California was using this to recover from their illness, except the railroaders.

As we started going out, we noticed that the rail carrier was not paying us. I asked [a BNSF general manager] why BSNF was not paying us since we work out of the state of California?

He said that National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) told him that we are “federal” not “state” employees and therefore we are not paying you. They also claimed that we fall under “Railroad Retirement,” which supersedes the state. So if we wanted to get paid, we had to come to work, even if we had COVID-19.

Even bills that were passed this last year and signed by Governor Newsom, such as AB 84 and SB 114, which provide COVID-19-related supplemental paid sick leave—we are not allowed to use, according to the carrier.

WSWS: Obviously there is a lot of anger among rail workers following the PEB recommendations. The unions, who fought for this PEB, are now parroting the carrier's talking points. What do you think of this claim “biggest raise in 47 years,” when inflation is near double digits and rail-workers have not had a raise in three years?

John: A lot of us want to strike. We want that to happen. I want to strike, car men, electricians, machinists, they all want to strike. The company and the union have been playing us for years. Telling us we can't strike. Now they tell us this is the best contract in the last 47 years or last 40 years. The truth is all our ratified agreements have all been big compromises and have fallen short for decades. Our working conditions have gone downhill, while profits have gone up. The railroad carriers, they laugh about it. For them it's a win-win situation. They play the unions off each other, saying one thing to one bureaucrat and something else to another. In the end they all end up singing the same tune, telling us to take the deal.

The locals are pitted against each other, but then you got the higher-ups, the local chairman, the general chairman, they tell us that if we keep fighting, the carrier might stop negotiating. They just want to settle. They don't want to work. Their salary is paid by us with our dues money. What are they doing to earn that high six-figure income?

WSWS: Any final thoughts?

John: We need to go on strike. Some people are saying that we can't, they are afraid, “What if the Republicans take control of Congress?” they say. For me there is no difference any more. Neither party is fighting for us. The lines, they are blurred between the two. What is clear is that they are all millionaires, looking out for what's best for themselves.

Politics today, certain people, especially the higher-ups, they think they are untouchable. That the law doesn't apply to them, because they have all the money. The only thing that will change their mind is if we go on strike. We got nothing to lose.





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