

As rank-and-file support for national rail strike grows

Railroad unions release joint Labor Day statement aimed at blocking strike action

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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.

This Labor Day, over 100,000 railroad workers in the United States find themselves faced with an extraordinary opportunity. In less than two weeks, a federally mandated cooling-off period will expire, and, for the first time in generations, thousands of railroad workers will be able to go on strike.

Seeking to prevent a strike, several rail unions, fulfilling their role as a labor police force working on behalf of the company and the government, have reached tentative agreements that accept the proposals advanced in the pro-corporate Biden-appointed Presidential Emergency Board (PEB).

In their recommendations delivered last month, the PEB called for meager wage increases that do not keep pace with inflation, the elimination of caps on individual health care contributions and no change to the hated Hi Viz and Precision Scheduled Railroading (PSR) system.

Railroad workers have already made their intentions clear. In hundreds of submissions, interviews and discussions with the *World Socialist Web Site*, rail workers have expressed their desire to strike over dangerous working conditions, hellish hours, meager pay and ongoing infections suffered after two years of working through the pandemic.

The most conscious expression of rank-and-file opposition to the ongoing exploitation of rail workers is the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. In their founding statement, the railroad workers wrote that their “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.”

While there is overwhelming desire among the rank and file for a strike, this past Friday the two major railroad worker 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), released a Labor Day statement revealing their plans to do everything they could to prevent a strike by bringing forward a tentative agreement prior to September 16.

The BLET and SMART-TD statement begins with the admission

that the bureaucracy is “embroiled in the ongoing effort to obtain a National Freight Agreement worthy of our members’ consideration.”

The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and International Association of Machinists (IAM), two unions “representing” over 6,000 railroad workers, announced they would “recommend” the PEB’s proposals to their members last week. This is part of the unions’ “divide-and-conquer” strategy, which is aimed at battering down workers’ resistance in order to force through a pro-company agreement before the “cooling-off” period expires.

By bringing forward PEB-patterned agreements, which have already been widely denounced by workers, the unions are doing the work of the company by recommending workers vote “yes” on the agreements, in the process deflating the potential for a strike and weakening workers’ leverage.

In their Labor Day statement, BLET President Dennis Pierce and SMART-TD President Jeremy Ferguson defended the unions that have already brought forward these PEB-patterned agreements. They all but admitted that they wanted to do the same thing and that the last course they wanted was “job action”—that is, precisely what the majority of railroad workers voted for.

After admitting that massive anger exists, the union bureaucrats wrote: “We know there are vastly different opinions amongst our collective memberships on what should happen next, and the democratic principles that drive our Unions give each member the right to their own opinion. Although current opinions may vary, there are other things that apply equally to us all.”

In fact, there are no differences of opinion among the workers. In the case of the BLET, members voted by a 99.5 percent margin in July to authorize a strike. The only “difference of opinion” is between the rank and file and the union apparatus. The latter wants to prevent a strike and ram through a sellout contract, knowing full well that no matter what terrible conditions and pay are forced onto rail workers, the apparatus will still be “taken care of” through members’ dues money.

After bemoaning the fact that Congress would intervene on the side of the rail carriers to prevent a strike through an injunction, the statement continues: “It is also 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. ... As such, BLET and SMART-TD members are situated differently at this stage of the negotiations than the members of most of the other Rail Unions.”

This demoralized paragraph is meant to sow divisions among workers and lead them to the conclusion that a strike would accomplish nothing since they are allegedly isolated after having been “carved out.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. There is immense support throughout the entire transportation and logistics industry for strike action. Far from being isolated, railroad workers have allies throughout the working class in the US and internationally.

On the West Coast, over 22,000 dockworkers have been laboring without a contract for over two months. In addition to facing many of the same terrible working conditions as rail workers, roughly a third of dockworkers in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) are classified as “casual” with no union rights or guaranteed hours.

In an interview last month, a casual West Coast dockworker told the WSWS: “Everybody, whether it be the airlines, whether it be the longshoremen, whether it be the truck drivers, they should all go on strike...”

It is not the workers who have been “carved out.” It is the union bureaucracy that has been exposed as the agent of the carriers and is now “situated differently” in the eyes and minds of workers.

After attempting to depress rail workers with a *fait accompli*, the statement continues: “Knowing that, we should not fault the Unions who have decided to allow their members the right to decide their own fate through a ratification vote. As we reach the end of the Railway Labor Act negotiating process, all of our contracts will soon be settled, one way or the other. Allowing the membership to decide how that happens is at the very core of the labor movement, and our Unions will not interfere in the decision by other Rail Unions to vote upon a Tentative Agreement based upon the PEB’s recommendations.”

The claim that these tentative agreements, patterned after the PEB that workers have roundly rejected, is just an example of “allowing the membership to decide their own fate” is as absurd as it is insulting. Workers already voted to strike months ago. By attempting to force through sellout contracts, the unions are defying the will of rail workers.

By bringing forward these agreements and recommending that their members vote for them, by gaslighting and browbeating workers with claims of “historic raises” and “the best we’ll ever get,” the unions are exposing themselves as stooges for the carriers, not genuine representatives of the rank and file.

The admission by the BLET and SMART-TD bureaucrats that “sooner or later we’ll all settle” is a significant admission. Essentially, they have their own deals worked out with the carriers in their back pockets and are just waiting for the right time to spring them on workers and force a vote prior to September 16.

The statement concludes that the unions will “continue to concentrate our efforts on obtaining Tentative Agreements for our members. ... While we know that many BLET and SMART-TD members would like to strike their Carriers for any number of reasons, it should not take a job action to reach agreement worthy of their consideration. We call on Congress to stay out of our

dispute, and if you do, we are confident that the rail carriers will move from their current positions and settle with their employees in a fashion that could be ratified.”

Two months after calling on the government to intervene via the PEB, now the rail unions are posturing as defiant of Congress. No doubt this is an attempt to distance themselves from their role in pushing the PEB in the first place. Despite the hot air, however, there is no question that the unions would welcome an intervention from Congress if they are unable to force through an agreement before September 16.

The union bureaucracies have a sense of the mass anger among workers and are fearful that an injunction from Congress might be defied. If this were to happen, the unions, now widely discredited, would be unable to contain the struggle of rail workers, which could spiral out of their control and threaten more than just carrier profits but the whole capitalist system.

The Labor Day statement from BLET and SMART-TD underscores the necessity of railroad workers across the US to join and build the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. If railroad workers leave their fate in the hands of the bureaucrats, their struggle will be isolated, suffocated and defeated.

As the founding statement of the US Railroad Rank-and-File Committee notes, the strength of the railroad workers does not derive from the support they receive from Democratic politicians, such as “pro-union” President Biden or trade union bureaucrats, “but the real and powerful support from the working class.”

It continues: “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.”

Join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee by emailing railwrfc@gmail.com or by filling out the form below.



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