

Biden calls rail unions to Washington for talks in bid to head off strike action

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A printable version of the Committee's founding statement can be downloaded here. Distribute it as widely as possible among your coworkers!

The federal National Mediation Board (NMB) called representatives from the railroad unions to Washington, DC Wednesday for the beginning of three days of government-mediated talks in a bid to avert a nationwide rail strike.

Last month, a Biden-appointed Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) issued a report recommending a five-year contract covering 150,000 workers in the seven large Class I railroads. Workers are furious over the proposals and are pushing for strike action, which could legally begin as soon as September 16, at the expiration of the present "cooling off period."

The proposed deal contains 22 percent wage increases over the life of the contract—barely half the current rate of inflation—the elimination of caps on individual health care contributions, and no change to the punishing attendance policies that have already driven tens of thousands out of the industry.

In defiance of overwhelming opposition to these terms, five smaller unions have already signed tentative agreements as part of a divide and conquer strategy to ram through a deal and prevent a strike.

"We have horrible working conditions," one CSX worker told the WSWS. "Pretty much 12 hours a day, and if you're lucky enough to get a day off, they call you constantly. We get no rest. They constantly break [Federal Railroad Administration] rules and try to force us to do the same. We can't get days off for doctors appointments or anything. They lie, cheat and steal. ... They cut jobs and dump the work on other jobs, pushing us to do more. One guy at my workplace passed out from the heat and had to be taken to the hospital. All they care about is the price of their stock. Well, I say we strike and shut them and their stock down. I've had enough!"

Labor Secretary Marty Walsh took part in Wednesday's talks, according to White House sources who spoke with *Politico*. This represents a major escalation in the Biden

administration's involvement, although Biden has already been heavily involved through mechanisms provided to him by the anti-worker Railway Labor Act, which is designed to all but eliminate rail strikes.

This includes the appointment of the PEB, which came at the urging primarily of the rail unions themselves. The unions falsely presented a PEB as a neutral arbiter that would save workers the trouble of needing to strike. Predictably, however, just like all other previous PEBs, if sided with the railroads.

Battle lines are being more and more clearly drawn. Railroad workers have enormous potential support in the working class, who would take a national railroad strike as a signal call for them to press for their own demands. Attempting to block this, however, is a conspiracy involving the union bureaucracy, the railroads, the White House and Congress.

The Biden administration is attempting to use the services of the pro-corporate union officialdom to smother the class struggle and enforce substandard contracts. At the same time as it is rushing to prevent a strike on the railroads, Biden is working with the unions to keep dockworkers on the West Coast on the job more than two months after their last contract expired.

But the fact that Wednesday's talks took place at all is a sign of extreme nervousness that the union bureaucracy may not have workers under control. The *Politico* article that first reported on Walsh's appearance added, "It's also a sign that contract negotiations between the employers and the organizations that represent their roughly 150,000 workers are not going as well as the White House may have hoped."

Indeed, the talks were announced the weekend after the founding of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, an independent group of workers fighting to organize opposition to the union bureaucracy and force a strike to win workers' demands. The founding statement of the committee, "Build the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee to fight for a national railroad strike!" has been widely read and distributed among railroaders.

Echoing the nervous commentary from *Politico*, an article in *The Hill* described a national railroad strike as potentially "kneecapping" the US economy ahead of the midterm elections. This universal concern for the "economy," by which

is meant the record profits and share values made since the beginning of the pandemic, expresses a concern that a strike could touch off a broader movement in the working class against the intolerable conditions upon which the “economy” is based. Indeed, even as Biden is attempting to head off a rail strike, the Federal Reserve is deliberately seeking to spark a recession by ramping up interest rates in order to suppress rising wages.

In its most significant passage, *The Hill* article states: “While Democrats are closely aligned with labor unions, organizers acknowledge that they likely wouldn’t allow for an extended strike just before the midterm elections. President Biden, who created the PEB in July to help resolve the contract dispute, is laser focused on unclogging supply chains.”

“After the pandemic and supply chain disruptions of the past two years, now is not the time for more uncertainty and disruption,” a White House official told *The Hill*. ‘Now is the time for the parties to resolve their differences, before the nation’s economy begins responding to even the prospect of a nationwide rail stoppage.’”

In other words, Biden is concerned that a strike, first of all, would completely expose the Democrats’ threadbare “pro-worker” pretensions in the critical weeks before the mid-term elections. A strike would expose the unanimous bipartisan support for attacks on the working class, because it would likely prompt an attempted intervention by Congress to shut it down. In spite of the increasingly violent, civil-war-like atmosphere within official American politics, both sides would quickly lock arms against railroaders.

The White House statement exposes the unions’ own integration with the two party system, and with the Democrats in particular. While the rail unions have accused the railroads of relying on a threatened government intervention to prevent a strike, in reality so are the unions themselves.

The unions are deliberately attempting to block a strike and sabotage workers’ strength by signing separate deals, five of which have already been announced for unions covering machinists, train dispatchers, carmen and electricians. This was essentially admitted in an unusual Labor Day statement by the two largest unions, the BLET and SMART-TD, which cover the engineers and conductors.

The machinists’ proposal also includes a “me too” clause under which any better terms reached by another union would automatically be enforced for the machinists. This has earned the ire of workers, who see it as a means to try and encourage machinists to abandon their brothers and sisters in other crafts, above all the engineers and conductors.

Even if workers in the smaller unions reject the TAs, the unions are trying to prevent them from taking part in a strike on September 16 by agreeing with management to extend the expiration of the “cooling off” period to the end of the month. This is an agreement that not a single railroader voted on, much less knew about before it was signed.

Workers must also be on the lookout for ballot fraud and other underhanded tactics during the balloting itself. One train dispatcher told the WSWS that many of his coworkers have not been sent ballots in previous votes over the course of many years, ostensibly due to an easily-rectified discrepancy between mailing lists.

“I have had that thought of voter suppression in some form,” the dispatcher said. “I mean, once National knew that the error/excuse was two mailing lists, it should have been a super easy fix: merge the lists. But I don’t accept the two-list theory, because on the first day of employment the union reps go around and have you sign up and take your first month’s union dues.

“The [American Train Dispatchers Association] is a racket on a national level, in my opinion. They don’t send ballots, they make members pay dues for many months but will not protect them [until the end of their probationary period as new hires]. National even said they will choose which rules violations or disciplinary actions they will pursue into arbitration.”

Frank Wilner, a former SMART-TD public relations director, expressed the contempt of the bureaucracy for workers in a *Railway Age* article published September 3 previewing the upcoming NMB talks. He said: “A looming stumbling block is gaining membership ratification of tentative agreements, as fringe elements of the labor movement have launched independent social media campaigns urging rejection—one including an alleged survey that violates scientific criteria for random sampling.”

In other words, the will of the railroaders is merely a “stumbling” block to ratifying a contract that they universally oppose, and groups which express the sentiment of the majority—here Wilner has in mind above all the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee—are slandered as “fringe.”

In reality it is the union bureaucracy that is the “fringe.” They have no support from rank-and-file workers and are seeking to prevent a strike which workers voted in favor of by over 99 percent.

The development of the struggle of railroad workers requires building on the momentum and organizing opposition, independent of the trade union apparatus. This means joining and building the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee.



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