

Business groups demand that Congress intervene to block national railroad strike

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Talks sponsored by the National Mediation Board between the railroads and the rail unions continued through the second of three days Thursday, as the Biden administration continues its bid to force a deal to block a national rail strike.

The White House is seeking to enforce contracts along the lines of last month's widely hated recommendations from the Biden-appointed Presidential Emergency Board (PEB). The PEB report recommended wage increases at roughly half the current rate of inflation (22 percent spread out over five years), along with lifting caps on health care contributions and the continuation of brutal attendance policies that leave workers on call 24/7. Among workers, support for strike action is overwhelming, and this could legally take place as early as next Friday, September 16, when a 30-day "cooling off" period expires.

There are growing signs of nervousness within the corporate elite that the trade union bureaucracy may not be able to hold back rank-and-file workers. On Thursday, numerous trade groups issued statements urging Congress to intervene to issue an injunction and impose a contract in line with the PEB's recommendations.

The railroads—which during PEB hearings infamously claimed that railroaders' labor "does not contribute" to their profits—are now issuing apocalyptic warnings about the impact of a strike on the economy. A study released by the Association of American Railroads Thursday stated

that the US supply chain would be unable to cope with a strike, which would cost at least \$2 billion per day, idling 39,000 shipping containers, 75 percent of all new automobiles, and thousands of carloads of food products and other materials.

The Fertilizer Institute sent a letter Thursday to congressional leaders urging them to "urgently begin preparations to begin the PEB recommendations"—i.e., ban strike action, claiming, "If farmers do not receive fertilizer, it results in lower crop yields, higher food prices, and more inflation for consumers."

In reality, the trade groups are worried not about the impact of a strike on the population, but on their profits, given that they have made a killing from rising commodity prices over the past two years. The letter by the Fertilizer Institute is particularly significant. US and Canadian fertilizer manufacturers are anxious to avoid a strike because they are seeking to capitalize on rising prices caused by worldwide fertilizer shortages due to sanctions against Russia, the world's largest exporter, as part of the US-backed proxy war in Ukraine.

Their argument warning of higher food prices also recalls similar claims made in 2020 by the meatpacking industry. The meatpacking companies obtained an executive order from then-president Trump mandating, using the Defense Production Act, that their plants not be subjected to lockdowns. This led directly to tens of thousands of COVID infections and nearly 300 confirmed deaths among meatpacking workers. It was later revealed in a congressional investigation that these claims of looming meat shortages were totally false, but the order has never been rescinded under Biden.

There is no doubt that a strike on the railroads would quickly shut down large portions of American and even world industry. But that only shows the immense power that the railroaders have, and why a strike would quickly win support from workers everywhere, who would use it

to push for their own demands against similar conditions in their own industries.

A national rail strike, moreover, would be a breakthrough with the potential to unleash walkouts in other critical industries, above all the West Coast ports, where Biden has intervened to ensure that over 20,000 workers remain on the job without a contract. The power of the railroad workers is precisely why Washington has sought to essentially eliminate strikes in the industry through the Railway Labor Act, first enacted in 1926.

The talks currently under way in Washington are a conspiracy of the railroads, union officials and the state against railroad workers. They are strategizing over how to push through a deal which has no support whatsoever from workers. One method in which the unions are seeking to do this is by dividing workers up, union by union, and forcing them to vote piecemeal on contracts patterned after the PEB.

Five of the 12 national unions have already announced such deals. The contracts for three of these include a “me too” clause under which better terms reached at other unions would automatically be enforced. This is widely seen by railroaders as a bid to convince machinists to abandon their brothers and sisters in other crafts to their own fate.

Very little has been reported publicly on the content of the talks, although *Politico* confirmed that Labor Secretary Marty Walsh participated at least on the first day.

The most substantial report so far has come from the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWE), which is affiliated with the Teamsters. In its account of the first day, the union said: “BMWED made it clear that while there were more issues to sort through regarding PEB 250’s recommendations for Travel Allowances and Away from Home Expenses, BNSF was most certainly hampering progress between the parties. While all other carriers have made commitments, BNSF refuses to agree to collective bargaining agreement language that is consistent with BMWED’s proposal and the PEB 250’s recommendations which would ensure BNSF Maintenance of Way Employees that drive their personal vehicle to travel to different work locations and worksites would be reimbursed for such.”

This makes clear that the railroads, in spite of record profits, are determined not to yield an inch to workers. The particular intransigence of BNSF is significant, given that the Warren Buffett–owned railroad is infamous for its implementation of a new “Hi Viz” attendance policy at

the start of the year, which was upheld by a judge who issued an injunction against a strike over the policy.

However, the fact that the BMWWE focuses its attention on BNSF, and over a relatively secondary issue at that, indicates that agreements in principle have already been reached on central issues—wages, health care, attendance policies—with the other six carriers, and possibly also with BNSF itself. The union is likely emphasizing this issue in a bid to obtain some sort of fig leaf that it can present to workers as a “victory” in order to encourage its passage.

Workers, however, are in no mood to settle for anything less than their full demands. “A strike is the only way to be heard. Unions are in the company’s pocket and not for the workers,” one Georgia railroader told the WSWS.

“My grandfather worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad in the 1900s,” one third-generation railroader said. “He worked in the railyards and became a porter. He was paid meager wages, and went through horrible working conditions most of the time.

“The rail workers should threaten to strike, and strike if its demands aren’t met. We should have real wages based on inflation, a pension that is funded more, better working conditions. Don’t worry about the mid-term elections, the Democrats & Republicans don’t represent you! Don’t let these politicians fool you, they represent the corporations and anyone that gives them a lot of money.”

An Illinois railroader concluded, “Now is the time to regain our dignity in this industry and take back our control over our unions. The rank and file have spoken so when our union leaders fail us we must take matters into our own hands.”



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