

With one week left before potential national rail strike, showdown building between US railroaders and Biden administration

Tom Hall**9 September 2022**

The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee is hosting a public meeting Wednesday, September 14, at 7:00 p.m. Eastern Time, “Organize to prepare for a national strike!” All railroaders and their supporters are urged to attend and register for the meeting here.

With less than one week to go before the September 16 deadline when a national railway strike can legally begin, a conflict is brewing between US railroad workers, on the one hand, and the major corporations, Washington and the trade union apparatus, on the other.

The sentiment for a strike among 100,000 railroaders is overwhelming. In July, engineers voted to authorize a strike by 99.5 percent. But it is not simply a question of what they want. They have no other choice. It is impossible for them to continue to work 80 hours or even 100 hours a week, on call 24/7.

The brutal work regime in the railroad industry, which is more profitable than any other, renders workers strangers to their families and leaves them even without time to schedule doctor’s appointments. Now, they are fighting against the attempts to impose a settlement from a Biden-appointed Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) that does not come close to meeting their demands.

A deadly collision Thursday on the Union Pacific in Southern California was a fresh and tragic reminder of the intolerable conditions workers are determined to end once and for all. Two workers died in the accident, bringing the death toll on Union Pacific alone to three over a 10-day span.

Union officials have been working desperately to try to prevent a strike and enforce the PEB against workers’ opposition. In a divide-and-conquer strategy, five smaller unions have already announced tentative agreements patterned after the PEB and voluntarily extended their own cooling-off periods to the end of the month.

However, there is a growing panic in corporate circles that the unions may not be able to do the job that is expected of them. Last week, the Biden administration intervened through the National Mediation Board, which recalled union officials to Washington for three days of mediated talks in which Labor Secretary Marty Walsh was present.

These talks are not “negotiations” but a tripartite conspiracy between the railroads, the unions and the government to enforce the contract before it reaches the point of Congress intervening.

According to anonymous sources who spoke with industry publication *Railway Age*, Labor Secretary Walsh attempted to lay down the law during the first day: “Walsh’s message, although not made public, was blunt according to some of those present,” the outlet said. “Don’t mess with the nation’s fragile economy weeks ahead of mid-term congressional elections as neither Congress nor the Biden Administration will like it.”

The talks cap nearly three years since the last contract ended. During this period, the anti-worker Railway Labor Act and other legal mechanisms have been used to enforce injunction after injunction and endless rounds of mediation and arbitration.

The unions have worked from the beginning as both the publicist and the enforcer for this process, even threatening to abandon workers to legal action if they violated injunctions. Far from the unions’ portrayal of the capitalist state as a neutral body, this process has been used reliably for decades to extract one round of government-sanctioned concessions after another from workers, while robbing workers of the democratic right to strike.

However, this time, all of the institutions that the ruling class has relied upon for so long are mired in crisis, while

the working class is being thrust into struggle by the deepest crisis of American and world capitalism in a century.

The development of a struggle of railroad workers raises fundamental political and organizational questions:

First, workers must draw the necessary conclusions from the role of the trade union apparatus, which is joined at the hip with the corporations and the state.

SMART-TD President Ferguson pleaded with rail conductors in a letter to the membership to consider the economic consequences of a strike—above all, for the bureaucracy, which would be on the hook for \$100 per day in strike pay. This from a person who makes over \$300,000 per year and heads an organization with over \$330 million in assets, mostly invested in corporate stocks. Last year, this money was used to finance \$17 million in union salaries and *zero dollars* in strike pay. This exposes the financial and social interests upon which the bureaucracy's hostility to workers is grounded.

The unions, after decades of bureaucratically strangling the class struggle, are discredited and faced with a growing rebellion from the rank and file. One of the most powerful and conscious expressions of this is the campaign by Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman for president of the United Auto Workers, on a platform of abolishing the union bureaucracy and establishing workers' control through rank-and-file committees.

Railroad workers have already taken the critical step of forming the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which has been met with a powerful response, with hundreds of workers writing in to join and get involved.

Second, the intervention of the Biden administration exposes the class character of the state, whether it is headed by a Democrat or a Republican.

The Biden administration regularly claims to be the most “pro union in American history.” This was always meant to create the impression that Biden is a friend to workers, while actually signifying that he is leaning heavily on the unions in order to suppress strikes and enforce sellouts. His intervention in the rail struggle is only the latest in a string of such campaigns in critical industries, including the docks and the refineries. Not only would Biden's double-talk be exposed if he and the Democrats were compelled to try to smash a rail strike, but a strike would also jeopardize his attempts to enforce labor discipline in other critical sectors.

A national rail strike would intersect explosively with the growing political crisis in the United States, the deepest since the Civil War. Whatever their differences,

however, the Democrats and Republicans are united in their defense of the ruling class and their insistence on placing the full burden of a deepening economic crisis on the working class.

Third, there is enormous support for railroad workers—in the American and international working class. Workers everywhere are fighting against brutal overwork, the spiraling cost of living and the disastrous human toll of the pandemic. There are mounting struggles among health care workers, autoworkers, service workers, educators and other sections of the working class.

In the railroads alone, this includes a lockout earlier this year in Canada by Canadian Pacific as well as a series of national rail strikes in Britain, the first in generations.

They are also facing off against corrupt union bureaucracies joined at the hip with the state. In Britain, the RMT (National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers), which has limited rail strikes to only a few days at a time, seized upon the death of the Queen to cancel planned strikes on September 15 and 17. There can be no doubt that a primary motivating factor was the fact that these strikes, sandwiched around the expiration of the “cooling-off” period in America, would have had a galvanizing impact on workers on both sides of the Atlantic.

The working class is exploding to the fore, revealing itself to be the most powerful force in society.

This strength, however, must find an organized and programmatic form. This is why the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International have initiated the formation of the International Workers of Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

But above all, the rail struggle raises the question of political power. Workers are squaring off not only against the railroads but against the capitalist state, which is intervening against workers on behalf of the profit interests of a narrow capitalist minority. Workers must take up the fight for socialism, the reorganization of society by the working class in the interests of human need and not private gain.



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