While rail unions meet with Biden to avert strike, 500 railroaders attend meeting to organize rank-and-file opposition

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With the specter of a national rail strike in the United States looming, two meetings took place on Wednesday night. The first, held in secret, behind closed doors in a Washington conference room, was between officials from the rail unions, the railroads and President Biden. The purpose of this marathon discussion, which lasted 20 hours and ended early Thursday morning, was to work out a concessions contract and avoid a strike.

The agreement reached yesterday is only a slight re-wording of the one proposed last month by Biden's Presidential Emergency Board (PEB), which workers overwhelmingly oppose and were prepared to strike against. It added only a single paid and three unpaid sick days. Most importantly, from the standpoint of the conspirators in Washington, it extended the end of the "cooling off period" to block a strike.

The White House was determined to reach a deal before the deadline to spare congressional Democrats the optics of passing legislation to try to crush a strike only weeks before critical midterm elections. From the floor of the Senate, Bernie Sanders, who presents himself as a "democratic socialist," played his assigned role in the conspiracy, blocking Republican-sponsored legislation to enforce Biden's PEB. Sanders, who voted in 1991 with a huge bipartisan majority to break the last national rail strike, was maneuvering to buy time, while bolstering the credibility of Biden and the Democrats and concealing the bipartisan unity against railroaders.

Sanders rushed immediately to declare the "real progress" contained in the sellout deal. Meanwhile, House speaker Nancy Pelosi admitted Thursday that Democrats had already prepared legislation in advance to illegalize the strike if it began.

The new tentative agreement is, in reality, an injunction in all but name, enforced through the screen of the unions.

The American political establishment never tires of claiming that all of its wars abroad are waged in the name of human rights and democracy. Yet in the United States, as far as it is concerned, the right to strike, the most basic right available to workers, does not exist. This is one thing they have in common with all dictatorships. Indeed, Biden bragged on Twitter Thursday that the "trains were running on time," a phrase commonly associated with Mussolini's fascist Italy and its brutal and bloody suppression of working class opposition, including of railroad workers.

In addition to Congress, the use of police and the courts, one of the principal means through which the right to strike is negated is through the trade union bureaucracy. The unions, completely integrated with management and the state, have for decades worked to block or isolate strikes and enforce one sellout after another. Biden, the self-described most "pro-labor president in American history," is seeking to rely upon and greatly expand on those corrupt relations that already exist. The latest White House–brokered sellout on the railroads follows similar maneuvers with the unions against dock and refinery workers earlier this year.

But the period in which all of this could have gone unchallenged is over. The working class is beginning to move into struggle all over the world. Every one of these struggles has tended to develop into a rebellion against both the union apparatus and the capitalist state. The highest organizational and strategic expression of this is the rapid growth of rank-and-file committees all over the world.

The second meeting that took place on Wednesday night was a major milestone in this growing rank-and-file opposition. This was an online meeting of over 500 rank-and-file railroaders and their supporters, sponsored by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee (RWRFC), the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. It was a democratic, open discussion, involving broad regional representation from workers across all major crafts and from all national railroads.

The remarks at the meeting expressed the visceral hatred that workers feel toward their conditions of exploitation and the union bureaucracy. Mark, a machinist and founding member of the RWRFC, said, "For contract after contract, we've taken concessions in pay and benefits. We risk our health and our lives every single day. Our families have to make sacrifices that most families don't endure: rescheduling holidays, birthdays, family gatherings, funerals, etc.

"These are all reasons why I joined the rank-and-file committee. To get organized, to ensure our democratic right to vote—and have those votes honored, not determined by 60 people in the Senate hell-bent on stripping those rights away—abolishing the Railway Labor Act that cripples our right to strike, getting rid of the bureaucracy and the union apparatus, and bringing the power back to the rank and file."

He ended by calling on workers to join the committee to form a

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"united front" against "the corrupt relationship between the government, the railroad carriers and the top officials of the unions." He concluded, "These are unprecedented times that call for action."

Raoul, an engineer from Chicago, said, "I'm tired of being treated like a peasant." While the railroads cynically warned about the economic impact of a strike, Raoul responded that the railroads "brought this mess on themselves" by eliminating tens of thousands of jobs. The US railroad network, he said, was built with workers' labor, including from "immigrants, slaves and the Chinese... Workers contributed to the success and prosperity of this country, but we don't get the credit for it."

The wife of a railroader spoke to the role of the Internet in undermining the control of the bureaucracy and empowering the rank-and-file. "We live in an age where information is instant... I believe that is the key difference in what is happening right now," she explained. "When the PEB released its recommendations, everybody instantly had it and read it before the unions could even get ahead of it and make a statement … that gives us more power than we've ever had. The Internet is a beast that they can't control. They're not going to have the control that they've had previously."

Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker running for president of the United Auto Workers on a platform of abolishing the union bureaucracy and fighting for rank-and-file control, also spoke to the meeting. Lehman, a socialist, encouraged workers to understand the connection between their struggle and the fight for socialism, which he defined as "power in the hands of the workers, of how we distribute the wealth we generate, with a sense of equality, and not have a few people gorge themselves on this wealth." He also shared his own experiences founding a rank-and-file committee at Mack Trucks in order to support the Volvo Trucks strike in 2021.

At the close of the meeting, attendees voted overwhelmingly to pass a resolution expressing the sentiment of railroaders, which reads:

> This democratic assembly of rank-and-file railroad workers resolves:
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> 1. We will not accept any act by Congress that violates our democratic right to strike and imposes upon us a contract that we do not accept and has not been ratified by the rank and file.
> 2. We demand a contract that addresses our needs, including a major pay increase to make up for years of declining wages; cost-of-living adjustments to meet soaring inflation; an end to brutal attendance policies; guaranteed time off and sick days; and an end to the push for one-man crews.
> 3. We inform the unions that any attempt to force through contracts that we do not accept and that have not been voted on, or to keep us working without a contract, will be in violation of clear instructions given by the rank and file.

David North, the chairman of the Socialist Equality Party and of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, spoke to workers about the significance of their meeting.

"Everyone who has spoken has pointed in one way or another to the fact that these organizations don't represent you. You have no control over what they do," he said. "So when we're speaking of rank-and-file committees, what we're actually talking about is, how do we create a means by which workers themselves can assert their power?"

He compared the rank-and-file committees to the Committees of Correspondence founded by the colonists in the American Revolution: "Out of this there emerged the Continental Congress, which was a new form of organization, to bring together people living across a vast territory to organize their resistance to the power of the Crown, so that they could inform themselves and formulate their own policy."

"You have huge power if you know how to use it," he concluded, "but what you first of all have to do is, in every work location, set up an alternative structure so that when you get the word that you've been sold out, that's not the end of the story." You must create the means to "overrule, counteract, countermand the decision of apparatchiks who are serving your enemies."

North warned that as the meeting was being held, the unions, corporations and the state were conspiring to block a strike and force through a pro-company agreement. These warnings were confirmed within hours, when Biden announced his brokered agreement.

The meeting, and the resolution that it passed, provide a powerful basis for the development of this fight for alternative leadership. This must now be carried forward by railroaders by developing the committees at every yard and terminal, holding meetings to reject the Biden-brokered sellout, share information and elect rank-and-file leaders to assume responsibility for the decision-making process.

Railroad workers: Fill out the form below for assistance and information on building rank-and-file committees to continue the fight.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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