

Railroad workers' opposition builds to sellout deal to block national strike

Tom Hall

18 September 2022

Railroad workers: Tell us what you think about the White House deal. Contact us by filling out the form at the bottom of this page. Contact the Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee at railwrfc@gmail.com.

Opposition is continuing to build among railroaders to Thursday's White House-brokered sellout deal with the rail unions to avert a national strike.

The deal resolves none of the workers' grievances and is essentially a rehash of the proposed contract terms from Biden's Presidential Emergency Board (PEB), with only a *single* paid and three unpaid sick days a year (up from zero) tacked on. In fact, union officials admitted last week that no formal agreement even exists yet, and will not for several weeks, making a mockery of the principle of "no contract, no work."

The deal is in violation of the overwhelming consensus of more than 100,000 railroaders for strike action to win a contract that meets their needs, expressed in a national online meeting Wednesday night of 500 workers, sponsored by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The meeting passed a resolution warning 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."

The unions hoped that the announcement of the deal would have led to the militant, determined mood among workers giving way to feelings of discouragement. This is not the case. Workers are furious at the betrayal and determined to resist it.

A signalman from Galesburg, Illinois who attended Wednesday's meeting told the WSWS: "If the union represents us, they need to represent us. It's BS they reached a tentative agreement, and told CNN before they told us. Everybody I've talked to about this TA said we've been sold out. We already said we would wait and then start a petition. We no longer want the grand lodge [the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen's national headquarters] in our decision-making process.

"Because of the [Railway Labor Act], these corporations and unions are looking at this and what they can get away with. Our health care is going to get more expensive. The biggest thing for us is pay, which is our biggest consensus. We are underpaid as the safety branch of BNSF. Any issue with the crossings or

switches, and we are personally liable by the FRA [Federal Railroad Administration]. If we are liable, we should be paid for that. Pay is a big deal. I also have a personal big problem with cameras that monitor our driving. It's not a horrible thing, but cameras have been used as a tool for termination by BNSF, not for safety."

Another Galesburg worker said: "These grand lodges don't represent the workers they are suppose to represent. All that happened on Friday is the unions decided to give Biden a win and probably got paid under the table or promised some cush job after they retire from being a union official. It's time for railroad workers to stand up and fight for our families and livelihoods! This PEB recommendation is BS!"

Numerous straw polls conducted on social media show overwhelming majorities opposed to the deal. Two Facebook polls conducted for maintenance workers showed workers against the deal by 88 and 93 percent.

Wednesday's rank-and-file resolution is also being widely read and distributed. "It's getting around in the union halls and on Facebook," one committee member told the WSWS. "Everyone is talking about it."

A letter from an anonymous California railroader is also being distributed widely on social media. Likely inspired by the Rank-and-File Committee, the worker lays out what he sees should be red lines without which workers should not accept any contract. "Members feel that their voice has been stifled by the actions of the President, by not acting on the vote cast by its members to strike," the worker says. His demands include at least three to five paid sick days, 28 to 31 percent general pay increases, cost of living adjustments, shift differentials and out-of-pocket medical expenses capped at \$300 to \$350.

"If these are not met with as written," the worker concludes, "we will turn down [the contract], so do not even bring [it] to the membership. ... This is the bare minimum we are asking for to ratify! If none of these are met, we are APPROVED to strike!"

Even though they have been able to work with the union bureaucrats to engineer a sellout, the political establishment knows it is by no means out of the woods yet. A worried lead headline on *The Hill*'s website yesterday suggested, "Deal averting railroad strike has potential to fall apart."

There is no doubt that overcoming the opposition of the rank and file was the primary, indeed the only, topic of discussion during the contract talks, and that fear of this opposition was instrumental in motivating the deal. In an article Friday based on interviews with those involved in the talks, *Politico* quotes National Economic Council Director Brian Deese as saying, “The fulcrum period was really between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. when Secretary Pete [Buttigieg], [Agriculture Secretary Tom] Vilsack and I made a round of calls to the CEOs to signal that it wasn’t clear this thing could close and that we took it very seriously and were going to resolve it and they needed to move.” Significantly, this “fulcrum period” overlapped exactly with the rank-and-file meeting.

The article makes clear that the political establishment fears the emergence of the class struggle in the United States more than anything else. Labor Secretary Marty Walsh described a national railroad strike in apocalyptic terms: “It’s like, Holy Christ: The magnitude of what would have happened.” These statements come as Washington is deliberately risking all-out nuclear war with Russia over Ukraine.

Dennis Pierce, president of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, observed to *Politico*, “There’s a lot of anger out there because of the way they’ve been treated all across the board in all of our unions. That makes it hard to ratify contracts when you get your employees all agitated.”

Pierce’s comments make clear that the task for the union bureaucracy is to try to remove this “agitation” by isolating and demoralizing workers. There are three main ways in which they are attempting to do this.

The first is by spreading out the contract vote as long as possible, in a bid to bleed off workers’ momentum. The BLET has indicated that it will be at least a month before a contract proposal is even available to vote on. “This is a break with tradition,” one Rank-and-File Committee member observed. “Usually, the talks under the RLA go on forever, but the vote itself usually is called only after a few days. I think they’re doing this also as a favor to the Democrats, to push the vote past the midterms.”

The second is through widespread censorship on social media of critical views. Workers report that one of the main Facebook groups used by workers, *Fight for Two Person Crews*, has been deleting critical comments *en masse* since Thursday’s agreement. A review of the comments in the group also suggest a marked shift in tone, previously dominated by anger at the PEB and the union officialdom but now dominated by praise for the deal.

The day of the deal, the National Conference of Firemen and Oilers, which is affiliated with the Service Employees International Union, announced that it was turning off commenting on its Facebook page, on the absurd pretext that this is to “protect our members from retribution and potential discipline from the Carriers.” They also admitted in the statement that for months the union had been “protecting our

members”—i.e., censoring them—“by removing comments that could be taken as threats for a concerted job action.”

It ended with a veiled threat of legal action against workers for striking, declaring its opposition to a walkout and adding, “We will only support a strike if it is **LEGAL** and in accordance with the provisions of the Railway Labor Act and NCFO Constitution.”

The third is by marshaling the forces of the pseudo-left agencies of the Democratic Party in order to capture and neuter workers’ discontent. Last Friday, union faction Railroad Workers United (RWU) held its online meeting, chaired by *Labor Notes* writer and former Democratic Party staffer Jonah Furman.

Labor Notes has plays a prominent role as cheerleader and apologist for the bureaucracy. Its conference this summer was addressed by Teamsters president Sean O’Brien, who is Dennis Pierce’s direct superior (the BLET is affiliated with the Teamsters) and Bernie Sanders, who voted in 1991 to shut down the last national rail strike. Sanders engaged in cynical maneuvering last week in the Senate, blocking a Republican-sponsored injunction while the Democrats in the House already had similar language ready to go.

The assembled speakers at the RWU meeting rejected the perspective of organizing workers independent of the union apparatus. One speaker specifically rejected any strike or work stoppage organized without the approval of the bureaucracy, claiming that this was not a decision for the rank and file but only for the leadership.

But the only way for workers to defeat the betrayals of the union apparatus is by organizing a rank-and-file rebellion against it, fighting to countermand their sellouts and enforce rank-and-file democratic control. The organization of the opposition of railroad workers means the building of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

For assistance in establishing a rank-and-file committee in your workplace, contact the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee at railwrfc@gmail.com.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact