

# The White House intervention to block rail strike and the political issues confronting railroad workers

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20 September 2022

The direct intervention of the White House to block a strike by more than 100,000 rail workers and, with the support of the trade unions, attempt to impose a sellout contract raises critical political questions for rail workers and the entire working class.

In Sunday's interview on "60 Minutes," US President Joe Biden emphasized the determination within the political establishment to block a strike. Speaking on the potential impact of a national railroad strike, Biden said, "If, in fact, they'd gone on a strike, the supply chains in this country would've come to a screeching halt. We would've seen a real economic crisis." This was echoed in even more apocalyptic terms by Labor Secretary Marty Walsh to *Politico* late last week, when he said, "It's like, Holy Christ: The magnitude of what would have happened ... We'll never fully understand, thank God."

What is it about a national rail strike that fills Biden and the political establishment with such dread? The economic impact of a strike (which they judge not in the shortage of goods, but in the impact on profits and share values) would have been major and immediate, demonstrating the immense social power of the railroad workers. Even more frightening for the ruling class, however, is its potential to develop into a general confrontation with the American working class as a whole. Since the Great Railway Strike of 1877, the first major strike movement in American history, the railroad workers have always played a central and vital role in the development of the class struggle.

The ruling class knows that it has created a powder keg by sacrificing more than 1 million lives to profit during the COVID-19 pandemic, and by driving living and working conditions for workers back to the 19th century. They are determined to prevent, or at least to delay, a massive social eruption as long as possible.

Over the course of the past week, the entire state apparatus demonstrated its hostility to rail workers. Prior to the agreement announced by the White House, Republicans

proposed legislation that would have implemented, by Congressional fiat, the recommendations of Biden's own Presidential Emergency Board (PEB), universally hated by rail workers.

The Democrats opted for a different path. Biden enlisted the services of the rail unions to block strike action, brokering a deal last Thursday morning. This is in reality an injunction in all but name, mandated by the White House but enforced through the mechanism of the union bureaucracy. Indeed, union officials later admitted that no final contract existed. The only hard commitments made by anyone were by the unions not to strike.

A critical role was played by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who voted with broad bipartisan majorities to ban the last rail strike in 1991. On Wednesday night, Sanders blocked the Republican-sponsored bill in the Senate, paving the way for Biden's announced agreement. But House leader Nancy Pelosi admitted the following morning that Democrats in the House had a bill ready to go the moment a strike broke out.

Despite the civil war atmosphere raging within Washington, both parties are united in their opposition to the working class.

The agreement announced by the White House and the unions on Thursday meets none of the demands of rail workers. It is the culmination of months of intensive government intervention under the provisions of the anti-worker Railway Labor Act, including the appointment of the PEB, which is the basis of Biden's agreement with the unions.

From the beginning, the unions have played a central role in this process. They called for the PEB—and a 60-day cooling-off period—after workers voted 99 percent to strike. When workers responded with outrage to the PEB's recommendations, which sided with the companies on every point, the unions tried to sabotage workers' unity by signing separate agreements, hiving off other crafts from the

conductors and engineers.

The Biden administration is pursuing a corporatist policy, based on an alliance of the trade union apparatus and its well-paid functionaries with the government and the major corporations—against the workers. The trade unions in all industries have worked for decades to enforce pro-company sellouts, while their own assets and salaries for top officials have exploded. Biden’s policy since coming to office has been to suppress an increasingly restive working class by greatly expanding on what already exists.

The purpose of this alliance is twofold. First, the White House hopes to use the unions to enforce labor discipline on workers in the United States to enable it to wage war abroad. The context in which the issue of a rail strike was raised in the “60 Minutes” interview was significant. It came up in the midst of a discussion on the economic impact of the US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, particularly on the price of oil and gas.

Second, Biden is using the unions to suppress wage growth by enforcing contracts well below the rate of inflation. Indeed, figures have shown that wages have risen over the past year at a much lower pace for *unionized* than for *nonunion* workers. They are also seeking to undercut the “wages push” by jacking up interest rates, thereby triggering rising unemployment. Only days after the concessions deal was announced on the railroads, the Federal Reserve is expected to announce another rate increase of three quarters of a percentage point.

The problem for Biden and the ruling class, however, is that both they and the unions are despised and discredited among workers. Biden may be declaring “victory” in averting a strike, but, just as with his declaration that the pandemic is “over,” this will prove to be premature. The workers will have the last say.

The White House hoped that the announcement of a deal would sow confusion and demoralization among workers. In reality it has only angered them and demonstrated the need to organize a rebellion of the rank and file against the union apparatus and the entire corporatist framework.

Throughout the struggle, workers have fought to organize and fight independently of the rail union bureaucracy. This found powerful expression in a meeting attended by 500 railroaders last week, sponsored by the Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which passed a resolution declaring that the unions and Washington had no right to enforce a contract which did not meet their demands.

Since the announcement of the deal, the work of that Committee has expanded significantly. It has issued a powerful new statement calling on workers to organize to enforce last week’s resolution and countermand the agreement.

The movement underway among railroad workers is part of a much broader movement for rank-and-file control in the US and around the world. This Thursday, Will Lehman, an autoworker running for United Auto Workers president on a rank-and-file platform of abolishing the bureaucracy, will take part in a candidates’ debate where he will confront sitting UAW president and close Biden ally Ray Curry.

Two basic conclusions flow from this experience.

First, the role of the unions in enforcing the demands of the companies and sabotaging the struggle of workers demonstrates the urgent need for the expansion of a network of rank-and-file committees that will establish the power of workers on the shop floor, allow them to countermand the actions of the union apparatus, and unify their struggles with workers in the US and throughout the world.

Second, the involvement of the White House and the entire political establishment in the attempt to force through a concessions contract exposes the class character of the state itself. It is not a neutral body, but an instrument of the ruling class.

The fight of rail workers to defend their interests therefore requires a political struggle against the Democrats and Republicans, the two parties of the ruling class. Both parties defend the capitalist system, which is based on the exploitation of the vast majority of the population, the working class, to meet the profit interests of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

A powerful resurgence of the class struggle, among rail workers and every section of the working class, in the US and internationally, must be connected to the building of a revolutionary and socialist leadership in the working class.



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