

“We’ll fight for what we deserve, with or without the union”: Railroaders furious after last week’s White House-brokered deal to block strike action

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The WSWS has been flooded with statements from railroad workers opposing last week’s deal to avert a national strike. We include a small selection below. Add your voice to theirs! Contact us by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All comments will be kept anonymous.

Next, take up the fight against the betrayal by joining the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email railwrfc@gmail.com or text (314) 529-1064. Distribute their latest statement, “The rail unions have violated our rights. Organize the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Network to countermand their betrayal!” as widely as possible among your coworkers.

“It’s bad enough that Congress wanted to take away our ability to strike, but now our own unions did the same thing”

A machinist: “I’m a machinist with eight years of service. We are sick of our upper parts of the union agreeing to anything, without any kind of vote. Ninety percent of our shop’s craft are on FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act], in order to take leave without being reprimanded. We shouldn’t have to go to these extremes.”

A West Virginia railroader: “It’s bad enough that Congress wanted to take away our ability to strike, but now our own unions did the same thing. All they did was give the companies and government more time to prepare against a strike by kicking the can down the road a bit. An old saying keeps ringing in my head: ‘Strike While the Iron is Hot.’ By delaying it with promises of a TA, and then saying it will be weeks before we can view and vote on it, our union is giving them time to prepare for the next rounds of war. The companies don’t care one bit about their workers, so we should use what power we have to force the issues that we are facing upon them rather than idly sit back and wait.”

An Indiana railroader: “The railroad has received record profits on the backs of the hard working T&E people. Give us a better schedule. Give us time off to take care of our declining health, and stop raising our insurance.

“I also feel that the union dues are going to increase just as soon as a contract is signed. The railroad owns us, our time is no longer our own. I knew that going into this job 19 years ago. But I also thought it was gonna be worth it. This job has only gotten worse as every year passes. The pay is no longer worth all the bullshit you have to put up with.

“This whole fake contract settlement doesn’t surprise me one bit. Joe

Biden and his constituents haven’t told the truth about anything as far as I’m concerned. Hell, they still deny that inflation is high. Our unions openly supported this president during the election. So none of this smoke and mirrors surprises me, in order to avoid a strike just before the election. Corruption and corporate greed are running rampant in this country, all on the backs of the working people. Enough is enough! Compensate us!”

An Oregon railroader: “The union sold us out. The government sold us out to fill their own pockets. I hope Biden, [Elizabeth] Warren, and [Bernie] Sanders were all very comfortable on their knees under that CEO’s desk.”

A local union rep in Oklahoma also sent the following statement: “I work on call 24/7 with no assigned or guaranteed days off. ... There is an ‘availability policy’ the railroad imposed and that we didn’t agree to in any way. They intentionally do not specify what the limits are on missing work. They use the terms ‘frequent,’ ‘excessive’ and ‘pattern of days,’ yet under questioning, the company witness (a manager) REFUSES to answer how many days are considered ‘frequent’ or ‘excessive,’ and what a ‘pattern’ is. There is intentionally NO line in the sand. This means they can charge anyone for missing any days. This is railroad abuse. This is how they scare us, by firing one person for missing work and making an example out of him...”

“As for this tentative national contract (of which there is no copy to see), it is garbage. We did not want what our union leaders settled for. My terminal and my local are overwhelmingly against it. We have lost much more than 24 percent in pay over the years, and we certainly should be able to strike without politicians getting in our way. The RLA has been manipulated against us.

“It needs to be spread far and wide that we FAR outnumber them and that we have power in our numbers. Corporate greed has all but wiped out the middle class and our union leadership has helped them! Washington is even worse, and when you consider that the very party that is supposed to stand with labor only pretends to help us because they want our money, then it seems hopeless ...

“Let’s shut the railroads down for a time and they will be brought to their knees. We need another 1877 strike. We need a revolution.”

A union insider explains how bureaucrats’ raises are at stake in the contract

The World Socialist Web Site received the following anonymous tip,

from someone who attended the Brotherhood of Railway Signalmen convention earlier this year:

“I, along with over a hundred other signal workers, was at the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen convention in June of 2022. Our national guys (Grand Lodge) pushed through a hotly contested amendment to the BRS constitution which was billed as a ‘pay rate structure change.’ It was basically a huge raise for everyone in the national office and the move enraged nearly half of the delegates. It was amended several times and finally passed ...

“For years their raises have been directly tied to the GWIs [General Wage Increases] that they secured for the majority of their members nationally. If they get us a 10 percent raise, then they get a 10 percent raise. That hasn't changed, but in addition to this GWI increase, this new restructuring of the pay rate system will bump all the Grand Lodge guys up substantially more IN ADDITION TO THE GWIs. They get two raises this time.

“However, due to a technicality and the rush job that was done on one of the amendments to the BRS Constitution at the last second, we discovered a big problem just recently. Their secondary raise will not take effect unless and until the membership *ratifies* the current TA (2019 bargaining round). The key word is RATIFY. If the membership votes down the TA and congress imposes an agreement, then our national leaders don't get the double pay raises.

“THIS IS WHY THEY ARE PUSHING THE MEMBERS TO VOTE FOR THE TA AND WHY THEY WILL NOT STRIKE! It has to be ratified or they don't get the extra pay raise.

“... The members need to know but we can't put anything out because they will black ball us due to a “no circular” provision in our Constitution. Help!”

“We all have bad backs, necks, knees, elbows because we're all doing the work of two or more men”

Railroaders also continue to send in descriptions of terrible working conditions.

An Ohio railroader: “Attendance policies put in place by these carriers have got us in balls-and-chains nowadays, and the union fails to do anything about it. We get penalized for using FMLA, some get fired for so called ‘abuse.’ Railroaders like myself get \$20 for meals up to 24 hours at away from our home terminal. The rest is straight out of our pockets. This is what really needs to change, along with the strict attendance policies that are being shoved down our throats and get worse each year.”

A Northern Indiana railroader: “Working conditions are tough. We have no manpower and are expected to do the same or more work with less guys. When I started in 2014 we had 14 guys for 130 miles of track. Now we have seven, but are expected to do the same amount of work. And two of those guys are track inspectors, so that leaves five for actual work.

“Our tools are outdated. Management is so incompetent, they couldn't plan a kid's birthday. We work long hours in the elements and because of all this, our health pays for it. We all have bad backs, necks, knees, elbows because we're all doing the work of two or more men. Now, we're not soft down here by any means, but pay us what we're worth.

“This contract that's stuck in the 70s needs an overhaul. Three weeks vacation on your eight year with no sick days is ridiculous. McDonald's employees get more than that. The airline pilots union got roughly a 80 percent raise in their contract. But I'll stop going on..... it's time to strike!”

A veteran signalman: “I am a signalman for Union Pacific. I have been doing this job for 15 years. I have watched this company force employees to quit with Precision Scheduled Railroading, and by only opening jobs where they knew they'd have to move themselves and the families. This was a strategy to make people quit. ... This was all during Covid, at the peak of their record cars being moved.

“At the same time they restructured the hotel lists we had to stay at, with hotels that were not at par to stay at. For example, [in one area,] there were three hotels on the Corporate Lodging list before the restructure. The Comfort Inn, Days Inn and a Super 8. We were told we couldn't stay there because only managers or directors were able to stay there. The hotel was only charging 70 dollars per night. The others were \$20.

“Mind you, Covid was just starting to go through the United States like a wildfire. I felt unsafe staying at the other hotels. I asked the manager, ‘Please don't make us stay here.’ He told me it was policy. Who approves this list? He does. It was all about saving money. This has been awful the last five years. It's only going to get worse.”

Another Indiana railroader: “I'm a member of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way. These actions by the railroads have got us to the breaking point. I see all these articles about our wages getting increased, etc. But I've yet to see anyone talk about the taxes we have taken out our checks after federal, state ... Medicare, union dues, medial insurance. We end up with 45 percent of our check! So yeah, the wages are so ‘great!’

“We try to make the rails safe so there are no bad derailments in these towns and cities, but when it come time to do it, they say, ‘Naw, we're gonna delay it another month, week, year.’ There are spots out there where we are surprised there haven't been big pile ups. But yet again moving that freight is more important ... I don't know how many times I've heard that over the course of my over 20 year career.

“People need to open their eyes. We're not the enemy here the corporate greed is what's going to destroy this country. Let the rich succeed while the what used to be middle class suffers. We worked day and night through the whole pandemic, and all we got was nothing. ... All we got was, ‘Get your ass to work, we don't have time for sniffles, suck it up and get to it.’ Someone would come into work and spread Covid, so instead of one guy being off, there were five or six or sometimes more. But the workload never changes. More with less is the way we work now.

“I think we have all had enough. The unions don't wanna back us, they are worried about politics. Enough is enough, give us what we deserve, with or without the union! These railroads can get shut down and we can all just walk off for the day or so. What are they gonna do, fire and arrest 135,000 of us all at once? We would like to see them try. They think there will be a crisis if we strike—wait till everyone walks out and this country will be really screwed!

“Signed, hundreds of thousands of rail employees!”



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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