

Electricians demand revote on rail contract after IBEW fails to mail ballots to many members

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Multiple members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) have contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* to report serious irregularities in voting on the recent tentative agreement impacting the 4,000 IBEW members in the rail industry.

The IBEW leadership claims the contract passed Wednesday with 1,189 votes in favor and 1,039 against (53 percent to 47 percent). The IBEW has 4,000 workers in the rail industry, and this 150-vote margin is already razor thin. Turnout was surprisingly low for a hotly contested contract vote, and by the IBEW's own count, only 25 percent of eligible voters supported the contract.

However, workers report that the voting was not legitimate and that the IBEW suppressed turnout by failing to send many workers their ballots.

"I never received a ballot," a member of the IBEW in Missouri told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "I did NOT neglect my voting rights, I was not allowed to vote!" The worker believes that the IBEW's failure to send her a ballot was not a technical mistake, but a deliberate decision to stop her from voting. "I absolutely know they have my correct address as I have received many union documents in the mail previously."

When the worker told the IBEW that she had not received a ballot, "I was told yesterday: 'tough sh-t.'" According to this IBEW member, one third of their work area did not receive a ballot and did not get to vote. So far, the worker is personally aware of five co-workers whose right to vote was denied in this way.

This phenomenon is being reported by workers in various locals.

Daniel Fuentes, an IBEW member in Alliance, Nebraska who was not sent a ballot, told the WSWs:

"Our union said they were supposed to mail us ballots, and a few guys said they got them last Friday. I've been checking my mail ever since then and I never received anything. Then I

heard the other day that we passed it, but my address has not changed in 20 years and the union has my address. I talked to some other guys who said they haven't received anything either. Some people say they got theirs late. And turnout was really low. I am skeptical because I didn't get to vote!"

Another IBEW member from Nebraska said he was suspicious about the extremely low turnout.

"That is a very low number for voting turnout in my opinion," he said, especially considering workers knew the outcome would be close. "I had heard there were several people that never received a ballot. I saw an email a few days ago from a brother electrician asking about ballots because he had never received one as well as a few others he talked to. I never saw a response from any of the local officials."

Workers also reported IBEW members receiving ballots only after the voting was concluded. One pipefitter in Missouri said she only received her ballot on the day the ballots were tabulated, after the voting period ended.

Concerns over fraud are spreading among rail workers because a former union official said the unions should override any "no" vote to ram through the PEB recommendations. Earlier this month, IAM Lodge 1112 cast only one vote on the Machinists' TA despite having 274 members.

Workers are asking their co-workers to step forward if they did not receive ballots. The Missouri IBEW members said, "How many people did not receive ballots despite requesting them and alerting union officials in plenty of time? I want a re-vote! I hope these crooked hacks get exposed!"

According to an internal IBEW tally provided to the *World Socialist Web Site*, the total number of "undeliverable" and "questionable" ballots adds up to 235, greater than the 150-vote margin by which the IBEW claims the contract "passed." Furthermore, the IBEW's internal tally shows there were 161 ballots mailed twice, which means it is possible some IBEW officials voted "yes" a second time.

Furthermore, the union reported only 2 votes from System Council 7 (both "yes"). On Thursday, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to the secretary of IBEW Railroad Department Director Al Russo and inquired as to the total number of

eligible voters in System Council 7. The WSWS gave Mr. Russo's office several hours to respond to this inquiry and to provide an explanation for the missing ballots, but received no response.

Workers also report the IBEW leadership rejected efforts by workers to establish rank-and-file oversight of the ballot counting in the run up to the vote. At a recent meeting of a local in Nebraska, workers had demanded rank-and-file oversight before the vote, but were denied this right by the IBEW. "We mostly get a shoulder shrug for a reaction," the Nebraska worker said.

The IBEW has a history of intimidating workers and committing fraud to pass sellout deals.

In June 2022, the Department of Justice announced that it had forced IBEW Local 98 to "conduct its next nominations and election of officers under the secretary of labor's supervision" because the union "intimidated and threatened other members who sought to challenge incumbent union leadership in the union's June 2020 elections." A 2021 lawsuit filed against the IBEW (Secretary of Labor v. IBEW Local 98, No. 21-96 EDPA) asserted that an IBEW business agent visited the home of a rank-and-file member in order to "'put the fear of God' into the member's wife and family." The union also required members to "walk a 'gauntlet'" at a union election meeting.

There is little question as to the intent the IBEW would have in suppressing the vote in rail. From the beginning the IBEW has collaborated with management to prevent a strike and force through a sellout.

In a statement announcing the contract's "passage," IBEW International President Lonnie R. Stephenson spoke as a partisan in favor of the TA and said he was trying to avoid a strike:

"The wage and benefits gains achieved under this agreement would not have been possible without the hard work of our Railroad Department staff, the solidarity of our members and the intervention of President Joe Biden and his administration. We thank everyone involved and look forward to continuing to do the work to keep America's freight moving safely and on time."

But in a letter dated September 20 from National Railway Labor Conference Chairman Brendan Branon to Stephenson, the industry representative implied that the IBEW and carriers had already reached a backroom deal, before any voting took place, to force the contract through.

In the letter, Branon wrote, "This confirms our understanding with respect to the tentative agreement ... such ratification *shall be completed* on or around September 28" (emphasis added). Branon then wrote that Stephenson had agreed "that the status quo period shall be extended" until December if the contract was rejected. Under these conditions, Stephenson promised the NRLC that there would be no strike.

An IBEW worker responded to the September 20 letter by stating the following: "I do not ever remember voting for this

Lonnie character. Why do we not have a say in our representation?"

Another electrician said, "I am supposedly represented by the IBEW. Since this process has started there has been no communication with dues paying membership as to what the most important bargaining items were for us. Was it wages, vacation, sick leave, holidays, health care, etc.

"Who do we need to contact to file a formal complaint against Upper Union Officials for not doing the job they are paid to do? I received a letter yesterday, not from my union but from a fellow craftsman, from the IBEW, sent to Lonnie Stephenson. The letter stated that he had decided to push our cooling-off period back to Dec 9, 2022. The letter was signed and dated Sept. 20, 2022. Keep in mind that the IBEW votes had not been counted yet and they have decided for those people without a contract to extend the cooling-off period another 80+ days! Are you kidding me!!!! Again, no vote by the membership to extend the cooling-off period, no communication! Can each union demand their leadership to Strike if the membership is for it but the Union Management is not?? A STRIKE NEEDS TO HAPPEN SOONER THAN LATER!!!"

Hundreds of railroad workers from all major carriers and from all unions gathered yesterday for a meeting hosted by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee (RWRFC) to plan the next steps in the struggle of rail workers against the corporations and the pro-company unions.

Workers attended from all over the country and voted 96 percent in favor of the following resolution, concluding: "We, the rank-and-file workers, declare that our patience is exhausted. We are not going to accept contracts stuffed down our throats through the methods of injunction and dictatorship, whether through the mechanism of Congressional decree or the treachery of the unions. We have the right to take collective action, up to and including a strike."



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