Workers demand answers: Why did IBEW mail 40 percent fewer ballots for 2022 rail contract vote versus 2018?

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As more IBEW railroad electricians realize they were not the only ones who were never sent a ballot before last month's contract vote, additional questions are emerging about its validity. Of particular concern to workers is the revelation that the IBEW sent nearly 6,300 ballots out in the 2018 contract but only 3,900 this year, a decline of roughly 40 percent.

On September 28, the IBEW claimed the vote passed 1,189 to 1,039, with a razor-thin margin of only 150 votes. According to an internal IBEW tally leaked to the *World Socialist Web Site*, this margin is lower than the total number of ballots marked "questionable" and "undeliverable" by the IBEW, which add up to 235.

Since the first workers stepped forward to report not having received ballots, the *World Socialist Web Site* has received a deluge of reports from workers who either never received ballots or who received ballots only after it was too late to vote on the contract. These reports are not isolated to any particular local or state, reports have come in so far from Missouri, Nebraska, Tennessee, California and other states. In many cases, the delay cannot be explained as an accident, since workers report that they notified the IBEW that they had not received ballots well before the postmark deadline and their requests for ballots were either ignored or delayed.

The results of past contract ratification votes of deals reached between the IBEW and the national freight carriers shows that substantially fewer ballots were mailed in the contract vote this year compared with the past.

According to the IBEW, the total number of "ballots mailed by Printer" was 3,902. But a "National Freight Railroads Bargaining Update" dated February 16, 2018, published on the IBEW's website, states that "6,269 ratification packets were mailed out to our Railroad members" during the 2018 contract, 2,367 more than in this year's vote.

The total number of votes cast in February 2018 (when the contract was initially defeated) was also much higher than in September 2022. In 2018, 1,415 workers voted "against" the TA and 1,253 voted "for" it, or a total of 2,668 votes, compared with only 2,228 who the IBEW says voted in 2022.

Railroaders know that many workers are quitting their jobs due to poor conditions, and that this doubtless accounts for some of the decline in total ballots sent. But the fact that the number of ballots sent in 2022 declined by a massive 40 percent versus 2018 raises questions about why so many ballots failed to reach workers in this contract vote. Many workers also report not knowing anyone who voted "yes" on this contract, raising additional questions about the validity of the recent vote.

The IBEW's claim to have mailed 3,902 ballots also does not correspond to public statements about the total number of voters eligible in the recent past. A month ago, a September 2, 2022, article in *Railway Age* listed the total number of IBEW members affected by the contract as closer to 6,000, consistent with the number of ballots mailed in 2018. "Of the 125,000 unionized rail workers affected by this round of collective bargaining, IBEW represents 5,800," the article by senior editor Carolina Worrell states.

According to Unionfacts.com, system councils 2, 6 and 16 (the three councils with workers employed by freight carriers) have a combined 5,737 members. A statement by the National Carriers Conference

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Committee from 2020, when this round of contract negotiations began, states that the IBEW has 5,800 members impacted by the contract.

According to IBEW Railroad Department training documents publicly posted online, the IBEW claims to represent 6,200 workers in freight. According to federal LM-02 forms the IBEW filed this year, those three system councils had more than 4,700 members combined. These figures were updated in March and July of 2022. This would signify that even factoring for the recent job losses, the total number of ballots "missing" may be as high as 1,000, 10 times higher than the margin by which the IBEW claims the contract "passed."

The *World Socialist Web Site* contacted IBEW Railroad Department Director Al Russo and spoke to him about reports of workers not receiving ballots. When asked what message he had for the many IBEW members who did not get ballots in time to vote, he said, "No comment." When asked whether he would organize a revote to ensure the outcome was fair, he again replied, "No comment."

This reporter attempted to ask whether the decline in ballots sent could be explained by a decline in overall membership, but Russo refused to answer. If there is an innocent explanation for the fact that 2,367 fewer ballots were mailed this time versus 2018, Mr. Russo was not interested in providing one. Russo also did not want to answer questions asking why he had admitted to workers on a recent phone call that ballots had not been mailed properly, but that an unnamed "vendor" was to blame.

There are growing demands for a revote among IBEW members who are aware the IBEW has tried from the beginning to force through a deal favorable to the carriers.

"As far as myself I have not seen a ballot," wrote an IBEW member and CSX worker in Terre Haute, Indiana. "You can get ready for shady deals. They are trying to avoid a strike. We don't get ballots or any voice for that matter."

A Norfolk Southern worker in Indiana said, "One of my electricians did not get a ballot, and he has been on the railroads for years." An IBEW member in Barstow, California, wrote that 20 percent of the workers in her shop did not receive a ballot.

Another Southern California railroad electrician and IBEW member said he never received a ballot, despite having double-checked that the union had his correct address before ballots were mailed. When asked about a recount, the worker said, "Yes, there should be a recount. I have talked to a lot of guys who don't agree on a yes for this contract."

More information is also coming out about allegations of fraud made by workers against the IBEW.

A member of IBEW Local 305 in Indiana contacted the WSWS to report that they filed charges (currently pending) against the local for "failing to address issues related to management voting in union elections directly in violation of our constitution." The worker says he filed charges against 10 officers and one international representative. This was "all being allowed and ignored in direct violation of our oath," the worker wrote.

This comes after the Justice Department announced in June that the IBEW Local 98 was required 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 union (*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.

IBEW members, please fill out this survey (personal information will NOT be distributed to anyone) as to whether you believe a revote is necessary to ensure the validity of the vote.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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