

The lies, distortions and half-truths in rail unions' joint video statement against "misinformation"

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On Friday afternoon, the presidents of the two largest US rail unions issued a video statement that they claimed would "dispel misinformation circulating on social media" and provide workers with the means to make an informed decision in the upcoming contract vote. However, the video itself consisted largely of misinformation and outright lies.

The video by BLET President Dennis Pierce and SMART-TD President Jeremy Ferguson was the latest in a series of statements put out by both unions as they flounder trying to recapture control of the narrative over the contract in the face of massive opposition. One railroader told the WSWs: "I've never seen them this scared. They usually don't say anything during these ratification periods ... they feel the anger building among the rank and file and fear us."

While all of these statements have purported to counter "misinformation" on "social media," none of them has named the source of these supposed falsehoods. However, they clearly meant to counter the growing influence of both the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which are successfully puncturing the information monopoly to which the union apparatus has long been accustomed.

Pierce and Ferguson started right out of the gate with the biggest lie of all. "Ultimately, the decision to ratify or reject this agreement is yours," Ferguson claimed. Both he and Pierce, he continued, wanted to ensure "that our members are given access to the democratic rights and protections provided by our bylaws and constitutions. You will decide the next steps that our unions take."

If this were true, railroaders would be on strike right now. In fact, all 12 rail unions have repeatedly and flagrantly violated the will of the membership in a bid to ram through a government-brokered sellout contract. Only hours before the BLET and SMART-TD announced a deal to avert a strike on September 15, a representative meeting of railroaders sponsored by the Rank-and-File Committee passed a resolution by 99 percent which declared in part, "We inform 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."

Pierce and Ferguson referred repeatedly to the threat of Congressional injunction during the video, making clear that, as far as they are concerned, the "ultimate decision" on the agreement lies with Washington, not workers.

The votes at other rail unions show that the bureaucracy will do everything to override workers' democratic will before it even reaches Congress. After machinists voted by more than 60 percent against their contract and more than 80 percent to strike, the International Association of Machinists simply announced a "new" deal identical to the old one, while extending a self-imposed strike deadline to early December. The IBEW claims that the electricians' contract passed by a narrow margin, in a vote marred by massive irregularities, including a large number of workers who never received ballots.

Even though the ostensible purpose of the video was to review the details of the contract, more than half of the video was devoted to a dishonest portrayal of the progress of negotiations.

After noting the intransigence of the carriers since talks began in 2020, and in particular their demands to reduce train crews from two workers to one, Ferguson claimed: "It was apparent that the carriers wanted one of the unions to cut and run," and to sign a separate deal. "Instead the opposite happened. Coalition grew in size and strength."

As a matter of fact, this is exactly what happened in the month before the original strike deadline of September 16. The other ten unions, as part of a concerted strategy to isolate and soften up engineers and conductors in the BLET and SMART TD, cut their own separate deals patterned after the recommendations by a White House-appointed mediation body. They scheduled votes and postponed strikes across a broad range of dates, ensuring that each contract would be voted on separately. This was left unmentioned by Pierce and Ferguson.

Pierce continued their account by claiming that, once the National Mediation Board released them from mandatory talks over the summer, "like all of you, we [the union leaders] began preparing for a national strike. But before that could happen, on Friday, July 15, and before the expiration of the first cooling off period at midnight, Monday July 18, President Biden announced that he was appointing Presidential Emergency Board 250."

This is a lie. Pierce and Ferguson were not preparing to strike but openly campaigning for weeks for Biden to appoint the

Presidential Emergency Board, effectively demanding that the White House block the strike that their own members voted by 99.5 percent to authorize.

On July 8, Ferguson issued a statement in which he said, “Let me be clear: rail labor is NOT looking to strike or shut down the nation’s economy at the expense of everyone.”

He continued: “We strongly believe that a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) will help us to garner that without the necessity of a strike. This does not mean that we will not do what’s necessary to get a fair agreement, but rather we expect the Railway Labor Act (RLA) to *do its job as it has in the past* so that it does not come to that [emphasis added].”

“Unfortunately,” they claimed in the video, the PEB’s recommendations failed to address sick days and attendance policies. But this could hardly have come as a shock to the union officials because the PEB’s have declined to rule on attendance policies over many years.

After the report was released, as workers reacted with fury to the details, the BLET and SMART TD issued a series of social media graphics aimed at presenting the PEB as an historic victory. If the unions now say the PEB “falls short,” it is only because they have abandoned by now any hope of convincing workers otherwise.

Now, the unions are focused on pushing through the September 15 deal brokered by the White House. It contains minor revisions to the PEB report, including three unpaid days per year for doctors’ appointments. In their statement, Pierce and Ferguson threatened workers with the unilateral enforcement of the PEB without these so-called “enhancements” by Congress if workers vote to reject.

“It is essential to understand that with the threat of a strike or lockout looming, the historical actions of Congress have rarely varied from the PEB recommendations, and it was clear while we were in negotiations on the 15th, that Congress would in all likelihood impose PEB 250’s recommendations before the strike deadline,” Ferguson declared.

The union officials speak as though Congress is some sort of external force, when in fact they have such close ties with Washington, especially the Democratic Party, that they essentially function as an arm of the state. If the unions are repeatedly threatening workers with Congressional intervention, they are not simply explaining the “reality” of the situation, but acting in close consultation with the Democratic Party, which vastly prefers to rely on the unions to transmit this threat.

Only days before the PEB’s report was released, House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi spoke at SMART’s Leadership Conference in August. SMART’s website carried a report of Pelosi’s appearance, which added, “Following Pelosi’s speech, SMART Director of Government Affairs Steve Dodd and National Legislative Director Greg Hynes ... explained that such achievements are largely due to the new level of access SMART has with the president, Congress and federal officials.”

On September 15, hours after the unions and Biden announced a deal had been reached to avert a strike, Pelosi quietly admitted that House Democrats had legislation prepared to shut down a walkout by railroaders. This followed similar legislation prepared in the Senate by Republicans.

Not only SMART TD but the entire union apparatus is closely integrated with the political establishment. Earlier this month, the IAM’s leadership cavorted with top Democrats, including Labor Secretary Marty Walsh, at their national convention held on the Las Vegas strip. President Biden, as well as Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, gave pre-recorded remarks.

The September 15 agreement is, for all intents and purposes, the Congressional injunction, except enforced through the mechanism of the union bureaucracy. They are now deliberately dragging out the vote for as long as possible, past the midterm elections, in order to both allow workers to blow off steam and to strengthen Congress’ hand should direct intervention become necessary. In the video, Pierce said that the vote for both unions is tentatively scheduled from October 17 to November 16, even longer than the three-week period suggested a couple of weeks ago by Ferguson.

More than halfway through the video, Pierce and Ferguson finally get down to the agreement itself. They began by claiming that the fact that the PEB did not propose a contract with single-man crews—i.e., one which contained massive layoffs—is a “huge victory.” In fact, this only maintains the massively understaffed status quo, at best, which the railroads will use to continue to push for one-man crews in the next round of talks in 2025.

However, the push towards one-man crews in general will continue even before then. A proposed new rule by the Federal Railway Administration, which the unions have hailed for supposedly upholding two-man crews, in fact contains so many exemptions that the FRA itself estimates that the number of railroads with one-man crews would increase tenfold.

Pierce then repeated the shopworn lie that the 24 percent wage increase, spread out over 5 years, represented the highest pay increase in decades. In fact, accounting for inflation, another rail union estimated that the deal would result in the first cut to real wages since 1991. To continue to repeat this claim, in the face of historic levels of inflation, is an insult to railroaders’ intelligence.

In concluding the video, Ferguson made only a half-hearted attempt to sell the contract, before ending by repeating the threat of Congressional intervention: “You should be aware that Congress could again be poised to impose the bare PEB recommendations, without the enhancements we have negotiated, if ratification fails.” Then he had the nerve to add, “And rest assured, our members’ wishes will be followed[!]”

In reality, Ferguson and Pierce’s video was a declaration that they will never yield to the will of the membership. This, however, is not the end of the story. Workers can and must enforce rank-and-file control by developing alternative structures that give them the ability to organize and act independently of the apparatus. This means the development of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee into a broad network embracing workers at terminals and yards across the country.



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