After threatening railroaders with congressional intervention, rail union parties with Nancy Pelosi on Las Vegas Strip

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11 October 2022

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Attend the RWRFC's Wednesday public meeting at 7pm EDT/6pm CDT, "No more delays! Organize the rank-and-file to fight for strike action!" Register for the event here.

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen began its national convention Monday on the Las Vegas Strip. The meeting takes place only days before the beginning of a month-long vote on a sellout deal which the BLET reached with the railroads which was brokered by the White House, which addressed none of workers' demands, above all the brutal attendance policies which leave train crews on call 24/7.

As with all such union functions, the BLET's convention is in reality more of a working vacation—emphasis on the vacation. No one can seriously believe that the choice of venue was made primarily because of its affordability or practicality. The convention is being held at Bally's Las Vegas, a central landmark in the biggest gambling center on the planet.

Bally's bills itself as "the casino resort where classic Sin City lives on at Center Strip." Given that "classic" Las Vegas was founded by Mafia gangsters, this certainly makes it an appropriate venue for the BLET convention. In between sessions, delegates can visit Bally's casino with 65 tables and over 1,250 slot machines, engorge themselves at its six bars and five restaurants, or beach themselves outside its two large swimming pools. Gambling, shows and other forms of entertainment all up and down the Strip are accessible by either a short walk or ride on the Las Vegas Monorail, which has a station on the hotel's premises.

In fact, this is the second consecutive convention being held by a rail union on the Las Vegas Strip. Earlier this month, the International Association of Machinists held its convention, albeit somewhat further removed from the center of the action in the Las Vegas Hilton. That convention took place only a couple of days after the IAM announced a "second" tentative agreement identical to one which rail machinists rejected in early September, and unilaterally extended their strike deadline into December.

The convention casts a stark light on the vast contrast between the railroad engineers and the BLET bureaucrats who claim to represent them. While the BLET lives it up at a swanky resort on workers' dues money, engineers struggle even to take time off to go to the doctor and regularly are forced to miss their children's birthdays and sporting events. Constantly on call, and regularly working 80 plus hours a week, their lives belong to the railroads.

The convention also included the usual promotion by the union apparatus of American militarism, and featured an appearance by an Air Force honor guard. This comes at a time when the US is deliberately ratcheting up tensions with Russia to the breaking point, raising the very real danger of nuclear war. However, the union bureaucracy as a whole is actively supporting the war drive. As the BLET was meeting, American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten made her latest pilgrimage to Kiev to promote the US-backed Ukrainian proxy fighters against Russia.

Top Democrats are making the pilgrimage to the Strip to address the BLET convention, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Barely three weeks ago, Pelosi had threatened to issue a congressional injunction against railroaders if they went on strike, and admitted that House Democrats had legislation ready to go if they walked out at the original deadline on September 16. In spite of the civil war atmosphere in Washington, Pelosi and the Democrats had no trouble closing ranks against the railroaders with Republicans, who proposed similar legislation in the Senate.

In the weeks since then, the BLET, as well as the other largest rail union SMART-TD, have continuously used threats of congressional intervention to justify their sellout the day before the strike deadline, and to intimidate workers into accepting the contract as inevitable. If they fail to approve the contract, the unions have threatened that Congress would force them to accept a deal which was even worse.

And yet the leader of the House of Representatives was given a place at the BLET convention as an honored guest. This shows that the union bureaucracy is in a conspiracy with

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Congress, as well as the White House, against the workers. They are doing everything possible to strengthen Congress' hand, including by delaying voting until well after the November 8 midterm elections.

The earlier IAM convention was also addressed by Labor Secretary Marty Walsh, as well as remotely by President Biden and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg. Pelosi herself spoke at SMART-TD's leadership conference in August, only days before Biden's Presidential Emergency Board issued its recommendations which form the basis for the current deal.

Pelosi's speech to the convention was a series of warmed over platitudes and hypocrisies. Pelosi declared the unions the "backbone" of the "middle class," and then disingenuously denounced the railroads' punitive attendance policies which are left in place by the White House deal.

Pelosi added, "For our nation's mighty railroaders: unwavering solidarity is how you stand strong against anti-union forces — and protect your livelihoods," then had the nerve to hail the tentative agreement as an example of the "power" of workers. Pelosi could have not have gotten these words out without being booed off the stage before an audience of actual rank-and-file workers, but was warmly welcomed by the delegates.

The type of "solidarity" which Pelosi was referring to was "solidarity" between the union bureaucracy and Washington. Since coming to office, Biden's domestic strategy has hinged on using the services of the union bureaucrats to prevent strikes and enforce sub-inflation contracts.

In spite of the opulent, self-satisfied atmosphere, the convention was also marked by a siege mentality, from bureaucracy which knows that it is isolated and despised by workers, and losing control of the narrative. The BLET itself made very little information available of the proceedings outside of a couple of brief write-ups on its website and Facebook page, and those posts had their comments disabled.

The same day as the convention began, Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) members, who like the BLET are part of the wider Teamsters union, rejected their sellout contract by 56 percent. The opposition of railroaders finds expression in the growing influence of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which has held meetings with hundreds of workers and is organizing alternative structures to enforce rank-and-file control and push for a national strike.

In his opening remarks, BLET President Dennis Pierce issued the latest denunciation of what he called the spread of "misinformation"—that is, facts being circulated by workers which the union does not want known. "From the trainmaster's office to Facebook chat boards, there are forces trying to tear us apart and pit our members against each other," Pierce said.

This crude amalgam is aimed at blackguarding oppositional workers, and above all the Rank-and-File Committee, as the pawns of management. But it is the union bureaucracy which is in bed with management and trying to "tear workers apart" by forcing through contracts using fraud, threats and divide-and-conquer tactics.

Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien sounded a similarly defensive note. "Our common enemy is not in this room"—which also included Pelosi—"it's the rail carriers," he said. "They want to degrade your working conditions. They want to divide us. We have to identify and fight the true enemy."

O'Brien, a former apparatchik of Teamsters president James Hoffa Jr., notorious for threatening violence against his opponents, has good reason to speak nervously. The rebellion brewing among railroaders not only threatens to overwhelm the bureaucratic obstacles which the unions have set up, but could also impact the fragile situation which the union faces in the UPS contract next year. In 2018, the last contract was enforced against a "no" vote by the membership using a constitutional loophole, and O'Brien, forced to put on a pseudo-populist stance in the face of rank-and-file anger, has pledged that the Teamsters will strike UPS if there is no deal by next summer's contract expiration.

The BLET convention continues through Thursday, but proceedings already have made clear that the union apparatus is a million miles away from workers and hostile to their interests, which could find no expression whatsoever in the stuffy atmosphere in Las Vegas. The convention is fresh proof that workers need the alternative structures to enforce their democratic will and countermand the betrayals of the bureaucracy. This means building the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

On Wednesday, October 12 at 7pm EDT/6pm EDT, the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee will hold an entirely different type of meeting, "No more delays! Organize the rank-and-file for strike action!" To register, click here.

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