

Railroad workers at rank-and-file meeting call for strike action to oppose sellout contracts

WSWS Railworker Newsletter
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The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee held its third successful public meeting Wednesday night, titled “No more delays! Organize the rank-and-file to fight for strike action!” It was attended by hundreds of railroad workers and their supporters, who discussed a strategy for building opposition to the sellout contracts being pushed by the rail unions.

Earlier that day, members of the RWRFC organized an informational picket outside of the BNSF Hobson Yard in Lincoln, Nebraska. This followed an earlier successful picket two weeks ago at the BNSF Argentine Yard in Kansas City. A dozen workers took part in the demonstration in Nebraska and passed out copies of the latest statement of the committee, “After rejection of BMWED contract: Fight against union sabotage! Prepare a strike before the midterm elections!”

One of the organizers of the picket spoke at the public meeting. “The reception we got from the general public was excellent, fantastic,” he said. “We had lots of people honking their horns, we had people slowing down and waving at us, and they were very, very friendly. We did have some workers come out and join us. The look of our superintendent seeing us as he pulled in for the day was definitely worth it alone.”

The opening report to the meeting from WSWS writer Tom Hall emphasized the importance of the vote by Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employes (BMWED) workers to reject the contract at the start of the week. The vote “shows the power you have,” and was also a “debacle for the government,” Hall said. “One outlet noted that only weeks after Biden’s high-profile victory lap, the possibility of strike action is now back on the table. This recalls Bush’s infamous ‘Mission Accomplished’ speech following the invasion of Iraq in 2003.”

The report also contrasted the Rank-and-File Committee meeting with the BLET national convention being held on the Las Vegas strip. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who earlier threatened to issue anti-strike legislation against railroaders, was given pride of place by the BLET bureaucracy.

“You are more powerful than the apparatus, and yes, more powerful even than the White House,” Hall concluded. “What you

need is to know how to concentrate and direct this power. That is what the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee is fighting to build. That is the purpose of these meetings. We’re not here just to sound off our anger and frustration. These meetings are strategy sessions, in which the rank and file can work out its own response. What you decide here, each of you must then go and fight for at your own workplace.”

At the conclusion of the meeting, workers voted on two poll questions related to the next steps that railroad workers must take. The first question asked, “If a walkout took place at another facility, do you believe that workers at your facility would honor the picket line?” 86 percent responded “yes,” 2 percent “no,” and 12 percent “not sure.”

The second question asked whether workers would support the rank-and-file committee setting a deadline for strike action. Seventy-seven percent of respondents said “yes,” 5 percent “no,” and 19 percent “not sure.”

During the discussion following the opening report, many workers spoke on the necessity for the independent organization of railroad workers. It was opened up by a member of the committee from Kansas City, who said: “Tomorrow, we’re having a representative from the International Association of Machinists, a special assistant to the president, and one of our general chairmen come to the Argentine Yard to answer questions about the contract. This is pretty unprecedented ... we believe that it’s because they know Argentine is a big thorn in their side. There will be a large turnout, a lot of questions will be asked and it will probably be heated.

“I know the main question that most of us have is, why did IAM President Kyle Loos nullify two strike votes? Why did he unilaterally decide to extend the cooling-off period longer than the cooling-off periods we already had gone through? We find this to be a huge crush on our democratic right to strike. It was an overwhelming strike vote [at the start of September.]”

He ended with a quote by Eugene Debs, the famous 19th and early 20th socialist railroader and strike leader: “‘I would not be a Moses to lead you into the promised land, because if I could lead you into it, someone else could lead you out of it.’ And I think that rings true today. We can’t rely on one person, or 12 leaders of 12 unions. It’s very evident they’re not going to lead the way they should be. We, the rank and file workers, railroad workers, the

united front, are going to have to come together and try to pull this off.”

A committee member and maintenance of way worker from CSX said, “I just wanted to congratulate the brothers and sisters of BMWED for standing up and voting down this trash agreement. This kind of thing has been going on far too long, and it’s not going to stop until we stop it. It seems like the union’s not going to help us out, no politician is going to do anything for us. We have to take it into our own hands. I hope the engineers and conductors do the same thing and send an even more powerful message than is already being sent. ... They have to know the days of laying back and doing nothing are over.”

WSWS writer Eric London also reported on the results of a survey conducted by the RWRFC of electricians on the IBEW contract vote, which the union claimed passed by 150 votes. In fact, there is significant evidence that the contract was rammed through with fraud. The survey revealed that nearly a third of respondents never received a mail-in ballot and nearly one-quarter did not receive theirs in time to return it before the deadline. Ninety-one percent said they were opposed to the deal, 90 percent said they did not believe the votes were counted honestly or fairly, and 93 percent supported a re-vote.

The moderator for the meeting also read out a prepared statement from a railroad electrician from Nebraska, which read:

The upper echelon of the union expect us to not fight them. Actually, they push us towards that. So, laying down and rolling over now ... will only empower them to do what they want, which is NOT for the betterment of the rank and file, those of us who actually keep the whole company going. The lack of ballots going out or being received with no time to get them back in time to be counted, to me is a major red flag that there's corruption at the top.

Right now would be such a great time to strike back at the corrupt as we can see in full light the corruption of this administration. We The People have the power. We outnumber them 1000:1. If we all come together, We can end their greed and truly make lives for us and our families so much better! I stand firmly on the idea of a strike!

Throughout the discussion, many workers asked about the legality of both the rank-and-file committee and of strike action. Moderators responded that the Rank-and-File Committee and its activity were 100 percent legal and protected by workers’ First Amendment right to free speech and freedom of association. They also clarified that the anti-strike provisions of the Railway Labor Act were official exhausted on September 16, and that although the unions have deliberately left it ambiguous, workers have had no legal restraints on their right to strike since then.

The “extensions” to the cooling-off period, it was explained, did not have the force of law, but were merely voluntary arrangements worked out behind closed doors between union and management negotiators.

The poll results and the meeting as a whole expressed the

powerful determination of workers to fight against the sellout contracts, including by taking strike action, which is being blocked by the apparatus of the unions.

Dozens of workers also left their contact information at the end of the meeting for more information about joining the committee.

Mechanics’ union claims narrow passage of contract, prompting suspicion from workers

The Mechanics Division of International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART-MD) announced last night that its contract had narrowly passed by 54 percent. SMART-MD is different from the much larger Transportation Division (SMART-TD), which includes train crews, and for which balloting has not yet started.

As with the IBEW vote two weeks ago, the announcement was met with immediate suspicion from workers. The number one source of concern was the fact that vote results were not expected for another two days, on October 14. To date, this is the only contract result which has come in early. Many workers also took to social media to claim that they had never received a ballot, just as with the IBEW.

Clearly anticipating a backlash, SMART-MD was remarkably defensive in its announcement of the result. “We hear the concerns of our members who may be disappointed in the outcome of this vote, and I promise that we will never stop fighting to ensure that they receive the wages, benefits and working conditions that they deserve for keeping the American economy running,” SMART General President Joseph Sellers said.



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