

Railroaders in Maryland and Southern California speak out against union sellouts

As voting approaches for railroad engineers and conductors, union head refuses to release vote totals for firemen and oilers contract

Our reporters
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Tens of thousands of US railroad engineers and conductors in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) and SMART-TD will begin voting soon on a deal brokered by the White House last month.

The five-year deal, announced less than a day before a national strike deadline, is far short of workers' demands. It includes wage increases below inflation, only three unpaid sick days per year and no change to the constant on-call attendance policy that has driven tens of thousands out of the railroad industry in spite of record profits.

The BLET and SMART-TD are stretching the vote out until November 16, more than a week after the midterm elections. The strategy of the rails unions is not to convince workers to support their respective contracts, but to invite congressional intervention to threaten workers opposed to them.

Workers in the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) rejected their contract in voting that ended early last week, but the union immediately countered by extending its own strike deadline until "five days after Congress reconvenes," or November 19.

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) earlier responded to a vote by members to reject their contract by announcing a "second" deal with identical economics to the first, while pushing their strike deadline into December. These extensions are entirely arbitrary and self-imposed. As a legal matter, limits on striking and other forms of self-help under the anti-worker Railway Labor Act were exhausted on September 16, meaning that workers can now legally strike at any time.

Worker opposition to this sabotage by union officials is growing. The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee is expanding its activities, organizing rank-and-file pickets around the country and holding successful public meetings with hundreds of railroaders.

The integrity of the vote must be a top concern for engineers and conductors. Contracts for smaller crafts have been narrowly ratified under dubious circumstances, with many workers suspecting fraud. In the case of the vote organized by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), significant evidence has emerged of voting irregularities, including many who did not receive mail-in ballots.

Last week, SMART-MD (separate from SMART-TD) and the National Conference of Firemen and Oilers (NCFO) declared their contracts ratified. SMART-MD's vote was met with particular suspicion because the results were announced two days earlier than expected. The NCFO, meanwhile, released only vote percentages with no further information.

In an attempt to learn more about the NCFO vote, a WSWs reporter spoke to union president Dean Devita over the phone Friday afternoon. The transcript of the entire exchange is below:

WSWS: what was the exact breakdown of the yeas and nays?

Devita: I'm not going to give you exact numbers. It was ratified by 58.7 percent margin and we had a good turnout. Members participated and they made their decision.

WSWS: Is there a reason why you cannot give the exact votes for yesses and nos?

Devita: Yes, here's my reason: I'm the president of the union and that's my decision.

WSWS: But workers pay dues to the organization and they are asking for the results to make sure it was fairly conducted. If it was fairly conducted, then why wouldn't you be able to tell workers the breakdown of votes?

Devita: Listen pal. I gave you my answer. I gave you a courtesy phone call. I don't think it's any of your fucking business.

WSWS: Are you saying the workers who pay dues to your organization and will have to work under the terms of

the contract do not have a right to know whether the vote was fair?

Devita [shouting]: Hey pal, you are trying to interfere in the business of my organization!

WSWS: Is the union your personal organization?

Devita: Hey pal, I see your fucking game, I see right fucking through it. Write the fucking article like I'm fucking telling you. You are fucking pissing me off. So go fuck yourself.

Devita's response, to the say the least, raises more questions than it answers. Devita, who in his capacity as president would have had ultimate authority in overseeing the vote, treats the decision over whether to release basic information about the vote as a personal decision, and accused anyone who questions this of "interfering with *my* organization [emphasis added]." This only underscores the need for rank-and-file control of the balloting process to prevent fraud and intimidation.

Baltimore-area CSX workers plan informational picket this week

Baltimore-area maintenance of way workers at CSX are preparing informational pickets this week. The decision was made by rank-and-file workers following a local union meeting where they expressed their anger at being kept on the job after rejecting their contract.

One worker who attended the meeting said that workers raised the question of pickets and began planning it from the floor. "One brother suggested we should hold it at the next Baltimore NFL home game," one worker told the WSWS. "Everyone agreed that that was an excellent idea. Hopefully we'll get some coverage. There was also an agreement by the brothers present that we will have a picket at the Capitol building here within the next few weeks."

"The problem [up until now] has been that the rank and file has not been setting the tone," he concluded. "We've been laying back hoping the unions would do the work for us."

WSWS reporters speak to workers at BNSF's Barstow Yard in Southern California

On Saturday, a campaign team from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited BNSF's sprawling Barstow classification yard in San Bernardino County. According to Wikipedia, the yard is the second-largest of its kind west of the Rocky Mountains and is a major conduit for freight traffic in the area. The team passed out hundreds of copies of recent WSWS articles and statements of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Workers took extra

copies to leave in the break room and workers said that word of the campaign spread quickly inside the yard.

The WSWS spoke with Keith [workers' names have been changed to protect their identity], an electrician from the yard. He said he has multiple people he knows that did not get ballots even though everything is up to date.

Keith explained that workers labored under the "30-60" rule, meaning they have to work at least 30 years in the rail yard and be 60 years old before they can retire.

"If you make your 30 years, but are not 60 years old yet, and you decide to retire, you don't get all of your retirement pay, even though we pay 13 percent of each paycheck right off the top towards our retirement," he said.

Another worker, Mike, told the WSWS he will have to work for 38 years if he wants his full retirement. Keith described the terrible working conditions in the yard. "We are constantly working in carbon and oil, and fumes are always being emitted from these trains. Being in Barstow, it is already hot and dusty. The issue of healthcare is very important. We know we are being poisoned, and now our insurance is going up and our wages are not keeping pace with inflation, so we are being doubly squeezed." Although once railroaders had no insurance premiums, they now have to pay hundreds of dollars a month.

Mike said that when he first hired on he was making \$19 an hour and insurance was free. Now, two decades later, he is only making \$33 an hour and insurance is nearly \$300 a month.

Despite all the billions in freight that move through Barstow, the social conditions in town are awful. Many rundown, decrepit motels on the main street outside the yard are used by out-of-town railroaders.

After leaving the yard, the WSWS spoke with Brian and his wife at a local restaurant. "We are fighting two corporations, the union and the carriers," he said.

He said that he has never seen a good contract, and that if they reject a tentative agreement, the unions make them revote on the same deal until they "vote right." He was worried that their old work rules are not in the new contract, and therefore might get tossed out with the implementation of the Automatic Bid Scheduling (ABS) system. Many workers who spoke with the WSWS agreed that the introduction of the ABS under the new contract is a major concession, and a step towards reducing non-op workers' schedules to the level of train crews.

Many workers expressed interest in joining the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee and organizing informational pickets at the yard.



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