

Teamsters president's message to railroad workers: Stop “complaining” about union betrayals to “outsiders”

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On Monday, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) released a video of Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien to its national convention, held last week on the Las Vegas Strip. The BLET has been part of the Teamsters union since 2004.

Despite the opulent setting, the convention had the atmosphere of an organization under siege. It came amidst the BLET's campaign to force the ratification of an unpopular sellout contract, which it worked out behind closed doors with the White House last month to avoid a national strike. The contract meets none of the engineers' demands, with wage increases below inflation and only three unpaid medical days off per year.

The BLET is acutely aware of the level of opposition and is afraid that it is losing control of the narrative among workers, who are organizing to fight the union bureaucracy's treachery through the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The first day of the convention included a highly defensive speech by BLET president Dennis Pierce. This was followed by a “town hall” meeting on the contract, open only to delegates and the details of which have not been published. All social media updates during the convention had comments disabled.

The opening speech, setting the tone for the rest of the convention, was delivered by O'Brien. His central message to workers was: Stop complaining about the treachery of the bureaucracy to “outsiders” and making the apparatus look bad.

O'Brien compared the union to a family dinner table. “When we leave this dinner table and walk out that door, we're a family. Whatever's discussed at that family dinner table, and whatever's decided ... no outsiders ever [weigh] in on what's decided. So when we leave here ... when we walk

out that door, we need to identify who that actual common enemy is. It's not in this room, it's not on this stage. It's the corporations, it's the rail carriers that want to destroy conditions [applause].”

Extending the family analogy, O'Brien added, “[my mother] controlled that dinner table. She used to tell us all the time, ‘Look, whatever happens in this house, needs to stay in this house.’” He continued, “We're our own worst enemy at times. ... never let anybody see your weaknesses. Sometimes we air our dirty laundry on the street and we show our weaknesses and vulnerabilities.”

O'Brien did not name who the “outsiders” were who were being allowed to “weigh in on what's decided.” But it could only have been a reference to the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has given railroaders a platform to voice their opposition.

O'Brien's comments express the antidemocratic outlook of the union apparatus. No matter how shamelessly the union officialdom sells out workers, they are not allowed to air their grievances except “in-house,” in narrowly confined channels where they can be controlled and smothered by the bureaucracy—where their microphones can be cut off during union meetings, votes to strike and to reject contracts are ignored or overridden, etc.

Coming from O'Brien, the admonition to workers not to air the union's “dirty laundry” in public must also be taken as a veiled threat. He has presented himself as an energetic militant since becoming General President last year. In reality, he developed a reputation throughout his career as a notorious thug for previous President James Hoffa until he broke with him publicly in 2018 to prepare his own run for president. O'Brien was once even reprimanded by the Teamsters union, whose top officials have long been notorious for the use of violence against rank-and-file opponents, for threatening supporters of an opposition candidate for local union office in 2014.

One of the main reasons that O'Brien cited for why

workers should not “air their dirty laundry” in public was because this would run counter to the Teamsters’ efforts to expand its dues-paying membership, which has declined from over 4 million to little more than 1.2 million. In particular, the Teamsters has launched a nationwide unionization campaign at Amazon, where it hopes to significantly expand its footprint.

“Teamsters love to complain,” he said. “But when we’re working next to people that are competing to take our jobs, we shouldn’t be complaining. We should be talking about why it’s so good to be in the Teamsters union.”

The fall in membership rolls is not the fault of workers “complaining,” but the cumulative impact of decades of sellouts enforced by the bureaucracy. The Teamsters’ union assets, however, have not similarly declined over the same period, instead ballooning to over \$525 million last year.

Indeed, these sellouts have been so extreme that UPS warehouse workers start out with hourly wages even lower than at nonunion Amazon. The Teamsters overrode a “no” vote in 2018 to enforce a contract that included major concessions, including a new part-time “hybrid” delivery driver position.

While O’Brien cynically claimed that “complaining” to “outsiders” only benefited the companies, it is the apparatus, not workers or the WSWS, that is in bed with the companies. The BLET is trying to ram through a concessions contract by leveraging the threat of congressional intervention in order to convince workers that there is nothing that can be done to oppose it, while extending the voting schedule until past the midterm elections to strengthen the latter’s hand.

While they cynically claim that the fact that workers are even being allowed to vote proves that workers “have the final say,” the experiences in the other rail unions proves that they will stop at nothing, including forcing workers to vote again on the same contract or through ballot fraud, in order to override a “no” vote.

When O’Brien claimed that the enemy was not in the room or on the stage, he said more than he intended. He and the BLET shared both with Nancy Pelosi, who had closed ranks with Republicans in preparing anti-strike legislation in case workers had gone on strike last month. Also attending on the second day was Labor Secretary Marty Walsh, who played the leading role in brokering the deal under threat of congressional injunction. These are the enemies of railroaders, whom they would not even have allowed to speak without getting booed off the stage. But for the bureaucracy, these are fast friends and allies.

O’Brien self-servingly tried to present the White House talks, in which he himself took part, as heated and adversarial, but this was contradicted by Walsh’s own equally self-serving remarks from the same stage, which

absurdly presented the Biden administration’s intervention as being motivated from the beginning by concern for workers and hostility to the railroads. However, what both speakers tried to conceal was that the talks were not “negotiations” in any real sense, but a closed-door conspiracy aimed at preventing a work stoppage and enforcing a sellout.

Walsh, a former union official who went on to become mayor of Boston and then Biden’s Labor Secretary, epitomizes the deep integration of the union apparatus with the capitalist state. Such transitions from union offices to government, or to corporate boardrooms, are made frequently and seamlessly.

Last but not least, O’Brien’s comparison of the union to a family dinner table is paternalistic and insulting. Railroaders are not children, and O’Brien is not their father. Workers are adults with democratic rights, and are free to say and think whatever they please.

Workers and the bureaucrats are not “family.” They live in different, mutually antagonistic worlds. This was underscored by the choice of venue itself, at Bally’s Las Vegas casino and resort in the center of the Las Vegas Strip. While the delegates enjoyed a four-day long working vacation paid for with workers’ dues money, engineers struggle to take time off to spend with their families or even schedule doctors’ appointments.

Top union officials make six-figure salaries drawn from billions of dollars in assets, consisting largely of members’ dues invested in the stock market. Maintaining access to this income is dependent entirely upon their ability to maintain close relationships with corporate America and the government by enforcing labor “peace.”

O’Brien’s speech was a declaration that the bureaucracy will accept no challenge from below which threatens these privileges. This only further proves that workers must take matters into their own hands and develop new, democratic structures which enable them to challenge the power of the apparatus, and enforce rank-and-file control.



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