

Opposition of railroaders to Biden-brokered contract points to breakdown of bureaucratic control

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Six weeks ago, President Biden announced to much fanfare a White House-brokered contract settlement with the railroad engineers and conductors unions, supposedly ending the threat of a national rail strike. Biden took a high-profile victory lap in the press, which presented the deal as a political coup de grace, and even as proof of his administration's support for industrial workers.

Today, this settlement is on the verge of collapse. There was "only" one obstacle that Biden, the railroads and union negotiators had not foreseen: the 120,000 US railroaders who rightfully see the deal as a massive sellout. It addresses none of their demands, above all an end to punitive, constantly-on-call attendance policies and time off. Despite loud claims of "historic" wage increases, the contract in reality amounts to a cut to real wages due to far higher levels of inflation.

Opposition is continuing to build and find a more organized, conscious expression. Last week, maintenance workers in the BMWED, the third-largest rail union, voted down by 56 percent a national agreement patterned after the recommendations of a Biden-appointed mediation board. The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, a group of workers formed to oppose the sellouts of the union apparatus and fight for workers' control, is continuously expanding its work through a series of informational pickets and widely attended public meetings.

The White House deal itself was reached in flagrant violation of the will of the membership, who have repeatedly authorized strike action by 99 percent or more.

The union bureaucracy simply ignored this and worked hand-in-glove with both Washington and the carriers to try to enforce a pro-corporate contract.

Even now, the unions are imposing arbitrary strike deadlines until after the midterm elections, to both avoid a political embarrassment for the Democrats and to strengthen Congress' position if it decides to issue an anti-strike injunction. The BMWED responded immediately to the contract rejection by extending its strike deadline until "five days after Congress reconvenes." The BLET and SMART-TD are delaying the end of the vote for engineers and conductors until mid-November after the midterms, in a process so obscure that workers don't even know when or if the vote has officially started.

The rejection of the BMWED contract produced shock and anxiety in the corporate press, which had assumed the threat of a strike had passed. Typical of the response was a *Wall Street Journal* editorial Thursday, which observed that the BMWED vote "is likely to sway others that also drove a hard bargain before the September deal. Once the deadline arrives, it takes only one holdout to sink an agreement because others won't cross the picket line."

The newspaper of the financial oligarchy concluded, "It's possible that the parties will reach a new deal. But now that the fight has resumed, the President who boasted that the 'trains are running on time' seems to have merely pushed the showdown to a time more convenient for the Democratic Party."

The *Journal* speaks for a faction of the ruling class that wants the contract over and done with through congressional intervention. Biden and the Democrats, while fully prepared to ram the contract through with force, prefers to use the pro-corporate union bureaucracy to enforce de-facto injunctions. The White House's actions on the railroads are a continuation of a policy

already being enforced on the West Coast docks and in US oil refineries. This is the real meaning of his claim to be the most “pro-union president in American history.”

The unions have responded to workers’ opposition by doubling down ever more shamelessly, by forcing workers to vote again when they reject their respective contracts or by “passing” them in voting controlled from top to bottom by the apparatus and marked by significant irregularities. While they are leaning more and more on the threat of congressional intervention, the BLET last week invited House Leader Nancy Pelosi, who has already drawn up anti-strike legislation, to its convention, absurdly presenting her as a friend to workers.

The railroads have been emboldened this. On Wednesday, the National Carriers Conference Committee issued a statement that pointed to the fact that the BMWED itself had earlier “hailed the tentative agreement” which workers rejected, that “six unions have already ratified the tentative agreements brokered through the facilitation of the Biden administration,” and that therefore company negotiators would not budge on sick days or anything else that deviates from the White House-brokered terms. If this is management’s position, then there is no possible justification for not calling an immediate strike, only underscoring the degree of deliberate sabotage by the union bureaucracy.

No one should underestimate the ruthlessness of the union apparatus, Washington and management. But developments have already made clear that the apparatus of control that the corporate elite have relied upon for decades to smother workers’ opposition is being seriously undermined and discredited by the rapid growth of the class struggle. Biden hoped a backdoor agreement with a few dozen union officials would be enough to settle the issue. However, the last six weeks have revealed that all parties to the talks are deeply isolated from and hated by workers, among whom they have no popular legitimacy.

The “laws of history more powerful than the bureaucratic apparatus,” Trotsky once said. The growth of the class struggle is an objective fact, and is being driven by a massive intersecting economic and political crisis. This crisis is being worsened by the ruling class’ own desperate and inconsistent improvisations, including jacking up interest rates in order to unleash mass unemployment to undermine demands for better wages and pushing the world to the brink of nuclear war.

The crisis is international in scope. This year, mass protests and strikes against the rising cost of living have broken out all over the world, including a refinery

workers’ strike and broader strike wave in France and a series of strikes in Britain among rail and dockworkers.

This has developed alongside extreme political instability, with all the institutions of capitalist rule are on the verge of collapse. In Britain, Prime Minister Liz Truss has resigned after only six weeks. Earlier this year, mass demonstrations forced the resignation of Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. The United States, the center of the crisis, is mired in its worst political crisis since the Civil War. It is increasingly likely that the midterms in two weeks could produce a debacle for the Democratic Party and resurgence of the Republican far-right.

A crucial feature of this movement is not only the growing militancy but the growing receptiveness of workers to socialism. This finds a particularly important expression in the support of workers for Will Lehman, an auto worker and socialist running for president of the United Auto Workers. Many are beginning to organize rank-and-file election committees to encourage their co-workers to vote for him. Meanwhile, the fact that direct elections are even taken place is due to a deep crisis within the UAW bureaucracy, where more than a dozen former top officials have been indicted on corruption charges.

The growing movement of workers to organize independently of and in opposition to the trade union apparatus through the building of a network of rank-and-file committees must be expanded into every industry and sector, in the US and throughout the world. This must be connected to the systematic building of a political leadership in the working class, to transform the growing struggles of workers internationally into a conscious political movement for socialism.



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