

“We need to put our demands out there and not leave it up to the bureaucracy”: Baltimore rail maintenance workers hold informational picket against sellout contracts

Our reporters
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Baltimore rail workers in the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees Division of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (BMWED) held an informational picket this past Sunday to fight back against the White House-brokered sellout contracts which the union bureaucracy is trying to shove down workers' throats.

The picket, the latest in a series of informational pickets initiated by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, was held to organize workers against the deliberate violation of the will of railroaders by the union apparatus and to build support for the railroaders within the general public.

The picket was held at a busy intersection before an NFL football game in order to maximize its visibility. The picket was warmly received by local residents, some of whom traveled from across the city to show their support. Motorists honked their horns in support of the workers.

In a vote which ended last week, workers in the BMWED voted down the national agreement by 56 percent. This sent shockwaves in the corporate press, which had assumed that last month's deal brokered by the Biden administration, reached only a day before the end of a legally-mandated strike deadline, had ended the threat of strike action.

In response to last week's results, the BMWED immediately extended a self-imposed “cooling-off” period to “five days after Congress re-convenes.” This is

a deliberate act of sabotage, giving Congress time to prepare to issue an anti-strike injunction safely after the midterm elections. Similar delays, as well as intimidation tactics and possible voter fraud, are being used by the bureaucrats in all 12 unions in a bid to force the ratification of the deal. Engineers and conductors have begun voting, in balloting also extended to after the midterms.

One picketer told the WSWs: “The reason we are out here is because the railroads' tentative agreement was unacceptable. We haven't received a pay raise since 2019. They have one-third of the work force that they had when I started right now. We are doing two-thirds more work for the same amount of pay.

“There has been no raise. We're covering and traveling farther and farther, covering more ground, more work. There isn't enough people to do this work. ... The money isn't matching. I'm going into debt because the gas, food, staying in hotels [while out of town working on the tracks], it's just not working.

“I'm staying with the railroad and I'm getting to retire, but you know, I'm hoping to get a better settlement for us that can cover the expenses. They cannot raise the health care; they're the ones that put us in this situation. We're out there breathing chemicals, and our fellow employees are coming in sick.”

Bill, a CSX maintenance worker for over 23 years, wore a sign that read, “American Class 1 railroads profit 2nd quarter 2022—\$5.998 billion. Raises for Employees since 2019—\$0.0.” He denounced the “collaboration between the government and railroads.”

“We voted the contract down, and yet, it still seems like they are still trying to push for it. The cooling down

period got unilaterally extended without talking to us until after the election.”

Addressing himself to workers around the world, Bill said, “Nothing is going to change for us unless we start taking matters into our hands. We need to be putting our demands out there and not leaving it up to the union [bureaucracy], but you know, we are the union, us regular workers, the rank-and-file workers. We need to step up and get involved.”

Another worker said that “we just want the public and the community to be aware that we just want to add paid sick days.” He explained that workers are fed up with the conditions they face. While previously he would rely on a credit card to meet expenses, “now I can’t keep up [with the need for] gas and groceries and hotels from mandatory travel for work.”

A local resident, Dom, denounced CSX for its mismanagement of the waterfront coal terminal. He explained that residents filed a lawsuit against CSX over the pollution blown into their community from giant uncovered coal piles. He mentioned the explosion that took place on December 21 in the coal terminal which released “dangerous and/or carcinogenic substances including lead, arsenic, silica and/or particulate matter,” according to the lawsuit.

Dom expressed his solidarity with the striking rail workers, saying, “I agree that their union goals ought to be aligned with the workers, but it is clear they are not.”

Andy, another Baltimore resident, came out to show support for the rail workers. “I ride MARC everyday to work. These guys here, work on the tracks for me, so that I can get to work everyday, so, I for one am here to support that.” He said he had also come out to raise awareness of the pollution faced by the people in the nearby Curtis Bay neighborhood. “[They] are trying to deal with the coal pier, which has huge stacks of coal and methane, and they are having explosions there. They can’t open their windows.”

The Baltimore demonstration was the third informational picket organized with the support of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Previous RWRFC pickets were organized in Kansas City and in Lincoln, Nebraska, outside major railyards. The Committee has also held several online public meetings attended by hundreds of workers.

These pickets had a powerful impact. Within days of each, high-ranking officials from the International Association of Machinists (IAM) raced down to Kansas City and Lincoln to address local meetings, a clear

indication of nervousness within the bureaucracy. The Lincoln meeting was addressed by IAM President Kyle Loos.

An angry atmosphere prevailed at both meetings. Workers demanded to know above all why there were not on strike right now, after having rejected their contract last month by 60 percent and authorizing strike action by 80 percent. The IAM responded to that vote by extending the “cooling-off” period into mid-December and scheduling a revote on essentially the same contract. In Lincoln, Loos went out of his way to attack the *World Socialist Web Site* at the end of his remarks and warned workers not to read it, an admonition which reportedly had zero impact.

This week, Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) President Dennis Pierce will be touring Missouri and Nebraska to try and sell the deeply unpopular contract for engineers. Pierce is scheduled to visit St. Louis on Tuesday, Kansas City on Wednesday, Lincoln on Thursday and North Platte, Nebraska on Friday. North Platte is home to Union Pacific’s Bailey Yard, the largest classification yard in the world.

If Pierce’s remarks to local town hall meetings are like the repeated statement made by the BLET on its website and on social media, the central message will be: You have no choice but to accept the contract, because if you don’t, Congress will intervene and impose something even worse. But only two weeks ago, Pierce and hundreds of BLET officials welcomed House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who had drafted legislation to crush a rail strike, as an honored guest.

The RWRFC is continuing to expand its activity and is in the process of organizing pickets in several other parts of the country. To join the Committee, or for more information about pickets in your area, contact them by emailing railwrfc@gmail.com, texting (314) 529-1064 or filling out the form at the bottom of this page.



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