

Railroad signalmen vote to reject contract, in latest blow delivered by workers to White-House backed deal

BMWED president admits to secret deal with carriers to extend strike deadline

Tom Hall
26 October 2022

Take up the fight for rank-and-file control! Join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee by sending an email to railwrfc@gmail.com, texting (314) 529-1064 or filling out the form at the bottom of this page.

Railroad signalmen voted by 61 to 39 percent to reject the tentative agreement put forward by the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen (BRS), the union announced Wednesday afternoon.

The vote saw the largest turnout in the history of the union, with 73 percent participation. This is a sign of the groundswell of opposition that has not subsided one month after the White House brokered a sellout deal with the largest rail unions to avert a national strike.

The BRS is the third of 12 unions to have rejected their respective tentative agreements. Two weeks ago, members of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) rejected their contract proposal by 56 percent. The International Association of Machinists (IAM) District 19 also voted down a contract in early September. Collectively, these three unions have more than 40,000 active members, roughly one-third the total workforce of the major Class I railroads.

One signalman who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* credited the outcome to the support and solidarity of workers across all unions and crafts. “Just thanks to all the brothers and sisters for sticking together in all crafts,” he said. “One voice may not be heard, but I hope now all our voices will.”

Wednesday’s vote comes only days before the start of voting on October 31 for engineers and conductors in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) and SMART-TD, by far the largest single segment of the workforce. The outcome will almost certainly embolden resistance among rail crews to their TA, increasing the likelihood of its defeat and raising the question of a national rail strike.

The BRS vote is also the latest setback for the conspiracy between the Biden administration, the carriers and the union bureaucracy to prevent a strike and ram through a sellout. The White House brokered a deal with the BLET and SMART-TD on

September 15, less than 24 hours before the legal deadline for a national strike. Biden then took a high-profile victory lap, and the corporate press breathed a sigh of relief, assuming the issue was settled.

However, the agreement, based on an earlier ruling by a Biden-appointed Presidential Emergency Board (PEB), is deeply hated by workers. They were incensed in particular that it does nothing to address the 24-hour “on call” attendance policies for rail crews and adds only three days unpaid medical leave per year, up from zero. While the wages under the deal are being dishonestly presented as “historic,” in fact wage increases over the life of the contract would be below inflation, the first such contract in three decades.

Over the past two months, workers have organized independently from the union apparatus to fight the deal. The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee (RWRFC) has held a series of informational pickets across the country and held online public meetings attended by hundreds of railroaders.

Faced with the angry reaction against both the PEB ruling and the September deal, the union bureaucracy has elected to drag out the voting process as long as possible in order to bleed off momentum. Voting for the engineers and conductors will continue until well after the midterm elections, in order to strengthen the hand of Congress should it intervene in the aftermath of a “no” vote.

In all three unions where workers rejected their deals, the union bureaucracy has also unilaterally extended their strike deadlines until mid-November or even later. Copying the timeline set by the BMWED, the BRS declared in Wednesday’s announcement of the vote results that it was extending its strike deadline until “five days after Congress reconvenes.”

Meanwhile, most of the five smaller unions that “ratified” their contracts did so in a completely opaque voting process in which serious irregularities have emerged. Significant numbers of electricians reported never receiving their mail-in ballots for the IBEW vote. SMART-MD (the smaller mechanic’s division of

SMART) released its vote results two days early without explanation. The NCFO did not release a breakdown of the votes beyond percentages, and president Dean Devita angrily cursed out a WSWs reporter when he asked for more details, accusing him of “interfering in the business of my organization.”

Washington is determined to avoid a strike, which would not only be a political disaster for the Democrats in particular, but would seriously undermine the entire corporatist policy with which the Biden administration is trying to keep a lid on the class struggle.

Even as railroaders vote on the tentative agreements, the Biden administration has worked with the ILWU to keep West Coast port workers on the job without a contract for three months, in what amounts to a de-facto strike injunction. A national rail strike would not only cause port activity, already strained due to rail-related delays, and other key positions in US supply chains to grind to a halt. It would also embolden port workers and workers in other industries to press for their own demands.

The union apparatus is more and more openly emerging as a critical line of defense for the ruling class, but even here there are increasing signs of worry. Also on Wednesday afternoon, BMWED president Tony Cardwell issued a highly defensive statement attacking unnamed “fringe groups proposing dangerous ideas of unsanctioned work stoppages.” This is clearly a reference to the RWRFC.

Cardwell’s statement was only the latest in a series of increasingly nervous statements issued by top union officials.

In reality, it is the position of the union bureaucracy that is “fringe.” Among workers, demand for strike action is near-unanimous. BMWED members voted by 99 percent to strike; BLET members by 99.5 percent, and IAM members by 80 percent. The will of the membership, however, has simply been ignored, while the officials resort to lies, intimidation and possibly even ballot fraud to manufacture a narrow “ratification.”

“Not only is an unsanctioned work stoppage illegal, but an uncoordinated strike is short-sighted and will not produce the result that at least one anonymous group is claiming,” Cardwell said. “Unions that have engaged in illegal strikes have been hit with catastrophic financial penalties. ... BMWED will not support or condone an illegal work stoppage and our bylaws prohibit strike wages or other benefits for an illegal strike.”

In the railroad industry, where the anti-worker Railway Labor Act (RLA) severely limits workers’ constitutional right to strike, union officials have long been accustomed to having a ready-made “legal” excuse for why workers cannot strike and must accept sellouts.

But as a matter of fact, Cardwell’s claim that a strike is “illegal” is completely false. All restrictions on striking and “self-help” under the terms of the RLA were officially exhausted on September 16. This has not prevented the unions from continuing to claim that a strike would be “illegal,” but neither Cardwell nor any other official has cited a single law to support this claim.

As for Cardwell’s declaration that the union would refuse to support “unsanctioned” strike action, a strike action would only be “unsanctioned” if the union refuses to sanction it. This is simply a declaration that he and the apparatus would act as open

strikebreakers, siding with management and the courts against workers if they strike in defiance of the bureaucracy.

Later on, Cardwell said the company negotiators had demanded that the union “agree to a no self-help period if Congress was in recess and the tentative agreement did not ratify.”

In other words, the extension of the strike deadline to after the midterms was entirely a voluntary arrangement, worked out solely between union and company negotiators. “No politician brokered our deal for us, it was the result of the BMWED and Carriers’ reaching a tentative agreement based on the PEB recommendations,” he added.

These secret deals, which presumably are attached to the contracts for all 12 unions, were not only worked out behind closed doors, without consulting workers. This also appears to be the first time that a top union official has even publicly admitted to the *existence* of such deals. Prior statements have been couched in vague language which left it deliberately unclear to workers why or on whose authority the extension was being made.

No genuine workers’ representatives would even have agreed to such terms. They create a catch-22 where workers cannot strike until they reject a contract, but then can’t strike if they do reject it. As long as the unions continues to propose TAs with these secret strike extensions, no matter how rotten and no matter how wide the margin of defeat, workers can be kept on the job in this manner forever.

“They just want to take care of the bureaucracy and screw the workers,” one electrician and member of the RWRFC said in response to Cardwell’s letter. “Signalmen voted no, so did we at the IBEW! The common feeling here is if there is a strike [anywhere], we will not show up for work, we will not cross a picket line, which is good. We need to strike. What we should abide by is what WE say, not what the corporations are saying.

“These people will come out and say that they own all the resources in this world. The oil, the gasoline, the natural gas, it all belongs to them. So we have got to shut them down.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact