

Letter by 300 business groups urges White House to intervene against growing movement of railroaders

Tom Hall**28 October 2022**

The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee is holding its fourth public meeting this Sunday, October 30, at 7:00 p.m. Eastern Time, “The unions say they won’t ‘sanction’ a strike. That decision rests with workers, not the bureaucracy!” Register for the event here.

On Wednesday, rail signalmen became the third of 12 crafts in the US railroad industry to vote down a national contract brokered by the Biden administration and union negotiators, which sought to prevent a national strike while meeting none of the workers’ demands.

The deal is now on the verge of a humiliating collapse. White House officials, having worked out an agreement with a few dozen union bureaucrats behind closed doors last month, assumed everything was settled. But they did not count on one thing—120,000 railroaders, who are determined to fight for what they deserve. On Monday, voting is scheduled to begin for 60,000 engineers and conductors. The signalmen’s vote creates momentum for these contracts to be rejected as well.

Railroaders, who voted nearly unanimously earlier this year to authorize strike action, are pushing for a national strike. This would be the most powerful strike movement in decades in the United States. It would immediately shut down 40 percent of the country’s freight transport capacity. More importantly, it would embolden workers in other industries—including on the West Coast docks, where port workers are being kept on the job by the union and the White House without a contract—to press for their own demands. It would demonstrate to workers everywhere that they can stand up to the corporations, to the corrupt union bureaucracy and even to the government.

Corporate America has now jumped into the ring in response to give marching orders to all the parties involved. On Thursday, more than 300 business groups issued an open letter calling on the Biden administration to step in to prevent a strike. “It is paramount that these contracts now be ratified,” the letter states, “as a rail shutdown would have a significant impact on the US economy and lead to further inflationary pressure.”

The letter continues: “Because the White House played such a central role in the process [which led to the contract], we believe it can be helpful in continuing to move the process forward in a positive direction. Otherwise, Congress will be called upon to act.”

The letter is virtually all of corporate America speaking with one

voice, from the US Chamber of Commerce all the way down to the Ohio Soybean Association. In spite of an unprecedented political crisis in Washington and the violent atmosphere between the two parties, the ruling class snaps together against the threat from below of the working class.

The fact that the fundamental dividing line in society is class, not race, gender or any other categories of personal identity, is forced to the surface by the growing movement of the working class itself.

The warning about the impact of a strike on the “economy” is dripping with hypocrisy. It comes from a class of economic arsonists who, through Washington’s monetary policies, are deliberately engineering a recession in order to use unemployment as a weapon against demands for wage increases. No such concerns for the “economy” have ever been raised in relation to the disastrous social cost of the unpopular NATO war in Ukraine, which has contributed to spiraling energy prices.

The solution to this problem, at any rate, is simple: Agree to workers’ reasonable demands, including paid sick days, cost-of-living adjustments and an end to the brutal attendance policies that have driven tens of thousands out of the industry. But even though the railroads are the most profitable industry in America, they refuse to even consider it.

The letter’s demand that Biden intervene to ensure that the contract “be ratified”—i.e., with or without the consent of workers—is the attitude of a corporatist dictatorship. Workers, as far as the signatories are concerned, not only do not have the right to strike, they do not even have the right to decide on their own contracts. If workers don’t vote the right way, then the White House or Congress will intervene to impose the “correct” decision. “Enough of this meddling of workers,” the letter is saying in effect. “Our profits are at stake!”

The Biden administration has been attempting to impose the contracts through the means of the pro-corporate union bureaucracy, which has worked continuously to sabotage workers’ strength and sap their initiative. Through endless strike deadline extensions, delays until after the midterms in order to strengthen Congress’ hand to intervene, and even through outright ballot fraud, the Biden administration is trying, through the union apparatus, to enforce a de facto ban on strikes.

Workers, however, are increasingly fed up with this, and the

apparatus finds itself discredited and isolated. This was behind Wednesday's letter by BMWED President Tony Cardwell, which attacked "fringe groups" advocating "unsanctioned illegal strikes." As a matter of fact, a strike at this point would not be illegal. It would be "unsanctioned," moreover, only because Cardwell and other union officials would refuse to sanction it.

The immediate target of the letter was the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee (RWRFC), a group of railroaders organizing to fight the betrayals and put workers in charge. But, in reality, Cardwell was lashing out against the overwhelming sentiment for strike action, which workers have "sanctioned" time and again.

Meanwhile, Cardwell admitted in the letter to a secret deal with the carriers to extend the status quo if workers rejected the BMWED contract (which they did two weeks ago). According to Cardwell, workers who demand that the will of the overwhelming majority be respected are "fringe," while union officials who act in defiance of the will of the workers are not. There is no reason to expect a similar angry letter from Cardwell against the demands from corporate America for more direct state intervention to ensure the contracts "be ratified."

The RWRFC published a response to Cardwell Thursday night. "What gives you the right to claim sole authority to 'sanction' a strike?" the committee asked. "It is not up to you and your fellow bureaucrats to override us and tell us what to do." It concluded: "on behalf of our 120,000 coworkers, we give you the following instructions: If you are not willing to abide by the will of the membership, then get out of the way."

In 1937, Leon Trotsky observed that the character of a trade union "is determined by its relation to the distribution of national income." Should the union apparatus "defend the income of the bourgeoisie from attacks on the part of the workers; should they conduct a struggle against strikes, against the raising of wages, against help to the unemployed," he said, "then we would have an organization of scabs, and not a trade union."

This definition, which even the most conservative unions of Trotsky's day generally fell short of, describes completely the activities of the bureaucratically-controlled unions today. They are working deliberately on behalf of the corporate elite against the workers they claim to represent.

But as the worst economic and social crisis in generations is propelling the working class into struggle, the authority of the apparatus is crumbling. Even as railroaders are sending contracts into the garbage, powerful support is developing in the auto industry for Will Lehman, an autoworker running for president of the United Auto Workers on a platform of abolishing the bureaucracy and transferring power to the rank and file.

Around the world, a strike movement is emerging, which is developing into an open political conflict with capitalist governments. Strikes in Britain by railroaders and dock workers were a significant factor in the downfall of Prime Minister Liz Truss after only six weeks. In France, a national refinery strike and mass sympathy actions involving hundreds of thousands of workers have been met with savage police repression by multi-millionaire President Emmanuel Macron. Earlier, mass protests against runaway price increases in the island country of Sri Lanka

forced its president to resign and flee the country.

Workers must take Thursday's letter as a warning. If the unions cannot be relied upon to deal with rank-and-file opposition, then the corporate oligarchy is prepared to bolster it with more overt, naked forms of state repression. Indeed, the Supreme Court recently agreed to hear a case which would greatly expand the ability of companies to sue for economic "damages" caused by strikes.

The entire experience contains a number of fundamental lessons, for rail workers and for the entire working class.

First, the opposition of workers can find no organized expression except through the establishment of rank-and-file organizations, including factory and workplace committees, to mobilize workers independently of and in opposition to the trade union apparatus, unifying all sections of the working class in a common fight.

Second, this pits workers in a political struggle against the entire corporatist nexus of the government, corporations and the union bureaucrats. In the case of the rail workers, the role of the state as an instrument of class rule is revealed directly, in the form of threats from Congress (Democrats and Republicans alike) to intervene and the role of the White House in brokering the concessions contract. But this is the fundamental nature of the state itself—not a neutral body, but the arm of a corporate dictatorship.

Third, the united intervention of all of Corporate America against the railroad workers exposes the basic issue: So long as economic and therefore political power remains in the hands of the capitalist ruling elite, the interests of the working class cannot be secured.

The logic of the class struggle raises the necessity for the working class to take power itself and restructure economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit, including through the transformation of the railroads and other major industries into public utilities. This is the program of socialism.



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