Contract votes begin for US rail conductors, engineers and machinists; Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee holds successful public meeting

WSWS Railworker Newsletter
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Voting began yesterday for 62,000 train engineers and conductors in the BLET and SMART-TD unions for a five-year contract brokered by the Biden administration. Voting is scheduled to continue until November 20.

The deal, struck with the unions on September 15 to prevent a national strike, is a sellout, reached in flagrant violation of the will of railroaders who voted nearly unanimously to authorize a strike. It includes wage increases below inflation, a mere three unpaid sick days per year and leaves in place the 24/7 "on call" status which binds workers' lives to the railroads.

Despite attempts by the union apparatus to sabotage workers' initiative by extending the voting and arbitrary "status quo" periods for weeks until after the mid-term elections, momentum is building for the defeat of the contract. Worried comments have appeared in the corporate press that present the deal as teetering on the brink of collapse, raising the specter of a national strike by 120,000 railroaders.

The opposition of railroaders to the apparatus finds its most organized expression in the activity of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which has issued a statement calling for the rejection of the engineers' and conductors' contract. The RWRFC also held a successful public meeting Sunday night, headlined "The unions say they won't 'sanction' a strike. That decision rests with workers, not the bureaucracy!" which was attended by nearly 200 workers.

Last week, workers in the Brotherhood of Railway Signalmen (BRS) voted down their contract, which like the engineers and conductors contract is based upon the recommendations of a White House-appointed mediation board. The BRS was the third of 12 unions to reject a contract, including the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employes (BMWED), with the third largest membership in the industry, the previous week, and the International Association of Machinists District 19, which rejected their deal earlier in September.

A re-vote on a "new" deal for the machinists also began yesterday. It is virtually identical to the one which workers earlier rejected, with meaningless additions such as a pledge by the carriers to bargain over travel expenses within 60 days *after* the ratification of the contract. "I've already sent my no vote in," one machinist told the WSWS.

Faced with the potential collapse of the deal, more than 300 business groups, representing virtually every major firm in America, penned an open letter last Thursday calling on Biden to act to ensure that the contracts "be ratified."

Former SMART-TD official: Failure by Congress to ban a strike would be a "joint risk for labor and carriers"

A revealing comment was published Monday in RailwayAge by Frank Wilner, a former SMART-TD public relations director-turned-industry pundit. Wilner earlier penned a column speculating that a "no" vote by the membership could be overridden through binding arbitration.

Titled "Rail Labor Update: A FUBAR Lurks," Wilner describes the possibility that Congress would not be able to come together to pass anti-strike legislation as "a joint risk for labor and carriers." In other words, this would be a disaster for the union bureaucracy, which is being entrusted with the task of enforcing the contract before it reaches that point. However, this scenario would be a major victory for workers because it would mean that they had forced Washington to step down from its threats.

Demanding firmer action to ensure ratification, Wilner complains that top union officials have been forced to make a verbal, tactical retreat by not formally endorsing the contract.

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"The void was populated by union radicals and fringe-group provocateurs," Wilner concludes.

As he has in the past, Wilner attempts to frighten workers with economic destitution in the event of a strike, pointing in particular to SMART-TD's absurdly small strike fund of only $8 million, a sum which would be exhausted in only a few days. In reality, the union is sitting on a massive pile of assets, financed through workers' dues money, which totaled $244 million at the end of last year, an increase of $100 million over 2020. The BLET and BMWED are both part of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which has more than half a billion in assets.

Another significant revelation in Wilner's article, given the incessant promotion by the unions of the Democrats and the Biden administration as friends of labor, is that Democrats were prepared to crush the railroaders' movement without even bothering with a deal. He writes:

> Not according to labor's script, those increasingly angry rank-and-file social media posts—many attacking their own union leaders in urging a work stoppage rather than a settlement—reached the eyes of labor-friendly congressional lawmakers, who recognized that they would be blamed for an economy-jolting rail work stoppage just shy of Election Day (thanks to the NMB's premature release of the parties from mediation). Anguished phone calls from Democratic lawmakers to the Democratic President commenced, with suggestions that rail labor be taken to the woodshed.

However, Biden opted against this, deciding for the moment that discretion was the better part of valor.

RWRFC public meeting calls on workers to "prepare themselves, to organize and to formulate their own response"

Sunday's public meeting, sponsored by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, stressed the need for the rank and file to organize themselves and prepare a plan of action, before the end of the vote, to put themselves in the strongest possible position to override the union bureaucracy's betrayals and answer threats of Congressional intervention.

The opening report was delivered by WSWS writer Tom Hall, who stressed the importance of last week's BRS vote. "Nothing has been resolved yet," Hall said. "But the power of the railroaders and of the working class in general is demonstrated by these votes. 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."

Hall, citing extensively from an open letter published by the RWRFC, also responded to attacks by the BMWED which accused the committee of being a "fringe group" advocating "dangerous ideas" of strike action.

"We are now just over three weeks until the end of balloting for the engineers and conductors," Hall concluded. "Everything at present currently points in the direction that workers will vote this down. But the worst mistake railroaders could make would be to adopt a 'wait and see' approach and wait until November 20 before considering what their next steps will be."

While Congress, the White House, the carriers and the union officialdom would be using the next three weeks to plan out their next steps, workers must also do the same, he stressed. "There is one thing that we can be sure of. If the fight is going to be successful—indeed, if there is to even be a fight—it will be to the extent that workers take control of their own struggle into their own hands, out of the hands of the unaccountable bureaucrats."

A wide-ranging discussion followed. One worker from the BNSF yard in Barstow, California, asked for clarification about whether strike action is legal. Meeting organizers responded that the anti-strike terms of the Railway Labor Act were officially exhausted on September 16, and that the later extensions to the "cooling-off" period announced by the unions were in reality the result of secret, voluntary agreements worked out with the carriers, not due to any legal prohibitions. The only thing keeping workers on the job at this point is the union bureaucracy, which is refusing to "sanction" a strike that workers approved long ago.

Speakers from the RWRFC also stressed the need for independent action by workers. A committee member spoke about the successful informational picket held by maintenance-of-way workers in the city of Baltimore last week, which was met with a significant response from the city's workers and residents.

"In the past workers felt powerless," he concluded. "But when we held the informational picket, the brothers felt empowered. *We* acted."

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