

BLET national officers “election” begins—without opposition candidates

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As balloting begins for a five-year contract for railroad engineers and conductors, another “vote” is underway for the national leadership of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET).

Faced with anger that the contract proposal, which falls far short of workers’ demands, has even been brought to a vote at all, BLET President Dennis Pierce has occasionally verbally backpedaled, declaring that workers, through the vote, will “have the final say” on the contract.

The leadership ballot, however, gives new meaning to “workers having the final say.” Out of a total of 26 positions, 25—all but the presidency itself—have already been chosen by “acclamation,” that is, without any opposing nominations, at the BLET Convention. All of these 25 appointees are members of Pierce’s “BLET United” slate.

Who “acclaimed” these officials? It was not workers. The average engineers have never even heard of most of these people, much less would have chosen them without opposition. Instead, they were chosen by a few hundred delegates, union bureaucrats whose careers and positions in the union depend upon the patronage of the upper echelons, to last month’s BLET national convention, held at a casino and resort on the Las Vegas Strip. In other words, “without objection,” the leadership has voted itself into office.

The only opposing candidate on the ballot in the BLET is Edward A. Hall, who is running as an individual against sitting President Dennis Pierce and his United Slate. Hall, the vice-chairman of Division 28, is himself a career official. He is a token candidate with little recognition among the national membership.

Under the BLET’s constitution, candidates must receive the nomination of at least 5 percent of the

delegates at the convention in order to appear on the ballot which is sent out to the membership. This antidemocratic provision exists to ensure that workers are not allowed the opportunity to vote for anyone who does not have the support of a substantial fraction of the apparatus.

This is in order to avoid a situation like that which is taking place right now in the United Auto Workers, where rank-and-file factory worker Will Lehman is running for president and gaining substantial support for his program of abolishing the bureaucracy entirely and replacing it with workers’ control.

Having appointed themselves to the leadership, the BLET United slate added insult to injury, wasting workers’ dues money by sending out election postcards prior to the “election.” Evidently, they considered this expense necessary because the incumbents were locked in razor-thin contests with themselves.

“There is no on-the-job training program for National Division Officers,” the promotional material reads. “[T]he membership needs and deserves National Division Officers that have represented the membership at all levels that stand ready to serve and represent on day one.” In other words, with no one else apparently “qualified,” they saw no need to nominate anyone else.

In 17th century France, the “Sun King” and absolute monarch Louis XIV famously summed up his country’s political system with the phrase, “L’État, c’est moi”—I am the state. If Dennis Pierce and his fellow bureaucrats were to honestly describe the internal regime inside the BLET, it would be, “we, the apparatus, are the union.”

The “ballots” being sent to members are a farce, which resemble the sham elections organized in dictatorships with only a single approved candidate. In fact, it is even worse, in some respects. Usually, these

types of regimes at least give voters the “choice” to express their disapproval by voting “no” or “none of the above,”—that is, if they are brave enough to cast such a protest ballot in full view of the secret police and gendarmes. Here, however, workers are simply being informed of what has been decided for them in advance.

However, this is hardly unusual in the trade unions in general, where leadership “elections,” if they occur at all, are tightly controlled by the bureaucracy, with incumbents being reelected for life, followed upon by their anointed successors, in a cycle lasting generations.

This is what “democracy” means to the union apparatus. Workers have the “freedom” to approve of the choice that the bureaucracy has made for them. These organizations claim to represent workers, but workers exercise no control whatsoever over them, while the “leadership” enforces one sellout after another.

As far as they are concerned, workers are not even allowed to complain about it. In his opening speech to the BLET convention, Teamsters president Sean O’Brien instructed workers to “stop complaining” and airing their “dirty laundry” in public (The BLET is a part of the Teamsters). Casting himself as the workers’ mother, he declared that workers should keep their disagreements “at the dinner table.”

This is a sharp warning to workers voting on the contract, both in the BLET itself and the other rail unions. Can anyone seriously believe that an organization which organizes such a sham leadership election will organize a fair and honest vote on the contract, one which is backed by the same bureaucrats who elected themselves but opposed by workers? The contract itself, moreover, was announced only hours before a legal strike deadline in September, in defiance of the will of workers who voted by 99.5 percent instead to strike.

The contract vote has already been subjected to weeks of delays, with more than a month and a half elapsing between when the tentative agreement was reached on September 15. Originally the start of voting was “tentatively” scheduled for October 14, before slipping without explanation to October 31. The purpose of this is to extend the voting until well after the midterm elections, in order to strengthen the position of Congress should it decide to intervene.

Indeed, the main “selling point” which Pierce and the other union heads have played up is that workers have no other choice but to accept it or face an even worse deal imposed by Congress. Meanwhile, Pierce and the BLET delegates invited House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who already had anti-strike legislation drafted, to their national convention as a speaker and honored guest.

Already, serious irregularities have emerged in the votes organized by other rail unions. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers claims its contract “passed” in a vote conducted by mail-in balloting by a narrow 150-vote margin. However, significant numbers of members say they either never received a ballot or received it too late to send it back before the deadline. Other unions, such as the National Conference of Firemen and Oilers (NCFO) claimed their contracts were ratified without even providing vote totals.

The BLET leadership “election” is more proof that, in order to organize themselves to fight for what they need against threats from both the carriers and Congress, railroaders must also reckon with the union apparatus, which is joined at the hip with railroaders’ enemies and runs roughshod over their democratic rights. Workers must shatter the untrammled dominance of the bureaucracy and organize new structures, democratically controlled by workers themselves, in order to put the rank and file in control.

This means the development of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, and the formation of a network of local committees at rail yards all over the country. In the first place, workers must insist on their right to oversee the balloting process, which cannot be left in the hands of a bureaucratic dictatorship.



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