

# Rail machinists union claims narrow ratification in contract revote; Labor Secretary threatens congressional intervention

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International Association of Machinists District 19 claimed on Saturday that its contract for 4,000 railroad machinists was narrowly passed by 52 percent, without releasing any further information. Last week's vote was essentially a redo on a contract that workers already voted to reject by 60 percent in early September.

Also, in comments to CNN Friday, Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh raised the prospect of congressional intervention to ban a strike and unilaterally impose the terms of the White House-brokered deal if workers vote to reject it. "My goal is to get those two unions back at the table with companies and get this thing done," Walsh said. He added that while ratifying an agreement was "the best thing we can do [to] avoid any type of rail strike or slowdown," if "for some reason [the union] doesn't get to an agreement with the companies then ... Congress will have to take action to avert a strike in our country."

While both parties in Congress have already prepared anti-strike legislation, this is the first time that the White House has publicly issued such threats. The previous week, more than 300 business groups signed an open letter urging the Biden administration to take a more active role in ensuring that the contract "be ratified."

While the significance of such a statement from the Secretary of Labor is obvious, the degree to which the union bureaucracy is openly colluding with Washington against workers is shown by the fact that Walsh spoke as an invited guest to the national convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen last month. Also invited to the convention, held on the Las Vegas Strip, was House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who had already drawn up

draft anti-strike legislation in the House.

In recent weeks, momentum has grown for a rejection of the contract in those rail unions that have not yet finished voting, including more than 60,000 engineers and conductors. The contract, patterned after the recommendations of a Biden-appointed mediation board, falls far short of workers' demands and has been teetering on the brink of collapse since members of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) and Brotherhood of Railway Signalmen (BRS) voted to reject the deal.

Washington, the rail carriers and the pro-corporate labor bureaucracy are doubling down, attempting to virtually frog-march workers into the contract through votes held under duress. This only underscores the urgent need for workers to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands and out of the control of the bureaucracy through the development of rank-and-file committees.

In the statement announcing the results of the IAM votes, union officials chalked up the result to the fact that "District 19 leadership worked day and night to communicate the agreement's benefits and *what would happen if it was rejected*" (emphasis added)—in other words, threatening workers with a congressional injunction.

As for the supposed "benefits," the "new" IAM contract is virtually identical to the one workers earlier rejected. It contains only meaningless changes, such as an absurd promise to negotiate over travel expenses within 60 days *after* the contract is ratified.

It was announced in defiance of not only the earlier rejection by machinists but of an 80 percent strike authorization vote. The IAM responded to that vote by immediately extending the strike deadline to late September. It later announced the second tentative agreement shortly before the expiration of the new deadline, and then pushed

the strike deadline even *further* back, into early December.

The BMWED and the BRS also followed suit after workers rejected their contracts last month. The BLET and SMART-TD unions have delayed the voting on their contract, which was reached at the 11th hour in White House-brokered talks on September 15, to November 20, in order to bleed off momentum and give Congress leverage to act by delaying until after the midterms.

There is every reason for railroaders to be suspicious of the IAM ratification. According to the union, it was approved by only 52 percent of voters on a turnout of 59 percent. This would imply a margin of victory of around 90 votes. However, while the IAM released fairly extensive information on the first vote in September, including vote totals broken down by local, no such information has been released this time around.

The WSWS has been informed that one machinist wrote to IAM General Chairman Kyle Loos demanding full information about the vote. The email reads:

I write to request an immediate release of the official vote tally. We, as members of the IAM D19, are due this transparency and demand a breakdown with an official count.

Furthermore, we demand to know who is overseeing the counting of the electronic ballots?

With such a razor thin margin, transparency should be of utmost importance, as it always should be.

With such a highly anticipated vote, combined with the anxiety of the rank-and-file and their family members, we demand a same-day official vote tally instead of a brief summary that was released today. Is the D19 staff going to release a breakdown of the official vote numbers? If so, when?

This is only the latest contract reputed to have been “passed” under conditions in which the union has failed to release any significant details of the vote. Earlier, the National Conference of Firemen and Oilers refused to release vote totals, and president Dean Devita cursed at the WSWS when he asked for more information, accusing the reporter of “interfering in the business of my organization.”

In the most brazen example, the IBEW declared its contract ratified under conditions in which significant numbers of workers never received ballots or received it too late to submit before the deadline.

Even if the IAM results are taken at face value, however, they are hardly an endorsement of the IAM. Rather, they show that workers know that the IAM officialdom will not

lift a finger to endorse, let alone to lead, a struggle. Shortly before the voting began, Loos was confronted by angry machinists at an informational meeting in Lincoln, Nebraska, where they accused the IAM of sabotaging workers. A similar confrontation took place with another top IAM official in Kansas City.

There is no reason to assume that the BLET and SMART-TD votes going on right now will be tabulated in an honest and transparent fashion. Indeed, the BLET leadership vote happening at the same time, in which all but one top official was “elected” unopposed by delegates at the convention, shows that the bureaucracy treats workers’ democratic rights with contempt.

The slate of incumbent BLET President Dennis Pierce lashed out against the WSWS’s reporting of the election in a recent email sent out to BLET members, which combined crude anticommunism with slander. “This socialist group is determined on destroying the very fabric of our Union movement and have yet to tell the truth about any of the issues that affect you today. They spread lies about the contract vote, your Union’s internal laws, our convention, and they are now interjecting themselves into our Election.”

That they felt compelled to release such a defensive, thuggish statement, however, testifies to the fact that thousands of railroaders consider the WSWS to be a critical source of information that is being withheld from them by the corporate press and by the bureaucracy.

The developments over the weekend have made clear that the situation is urgent. If workers are to be able to wage a fight for their demands and put themselves in the best possible position to answer threats of government intervention, this requires they break free from the bureaucratic stranglehold of the bureaucracy and fight for workers’ control over the struggle. This means the development of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, to develop independent organs to give workers the means to countermand the apparatus and give themselves democratic control.



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