

A reply to a BLET bureaucrat's attack on the World Socialist Web Site and rank-and-file workers

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Last week, the *World Socialist Web Site* published a comment about the national leadership elections at the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET). We called attention to the fact that 25 of the 26 top positions were “elected by acclamation”—i.e., with no nominated opponents—at the BLET’s convention last month. Only union president Dennis Pierce faces even a token opposition in the membership vote.

We characterized this as a “sham election,” resembling the type “organized in dictatorships with only a single approved candidate.” We added that this raised questions about the integrity of the contract vote for engineers, which is going on at the same time, and concluded that workers needed to organize themselves independently to enforce rank-and-file oversight of the balloting.

This clearly touched a nerve at BLET headquarters in suburban Cleveland. Within two days, the Pierce’s BLET United Slate sent out a “campaign” email to tens of thousands of union members in response. In reality, it was a hysterical screed against the WSWs, combining crude anticommunism with slander.

The letter was written by Mark Wallace, the first vice president-elect of the BLET, “having run for office without an opponent at our recent convention,” as he himself acknowledges. Wallace urges workers to “make the right choice”—a responsibility from which they were relieved by the union bureaucracy in Wallace’s case, by voting for Pierce.

Wallace touts Pierce’s record of “negotiating agreements” as the main selling point for his reelection. This, no doubt, would come as something of a surprise to rail engineers, who have had one round of concessions forced down their throats after another.

VP-elect Wallace then gets down to brass tacks. “President Pierce’s opponent has embraced help from an anti-Union, non-BLET group to help spread his falsehoods and misrepresentations,” Wallace claims, clearly referencing the

WSWS. “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. Be clear, like President Pierce’s opponent, they only care about their own interests, they do not care about yours. No one lies to you to help you.”

Wallace is making a false amalgam between the WSWs and Pierce’s lone opponent, Eddie Hall. To be clear, the WSWs has never endorsed Hall. It has called attention to the BLET’s sham election to expose the entire rotten structure and is encouraging rank-and-file opposition to it.

After leading off with a lie of his own, he then accuses the WSWs of “spreading lies.” He does not cite a single instance of this, but implicitly acknowledges, by defending the system of “election by acclamation,” that what we wrote about the elections was true.

What Wallace and the apparatus are really concerned about is the growing anger of rank-and-file workers, for which the WSWs has provided a platform and has assisted in organizing. Rail workers are overwhelmingly opposed to the Biden-sponsored contract settlement that the BLET is trying to push through. The WSWs has published dozens, if not hundreds, of comments from railroaders across all crafts expressing their opposition to the deal.

In opposition to the anti-democratic maneuvers of the apparatus, workers have formed the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, to give themselves the means to “countermand,” in its words, decisions by the apparatus that violate the will of the membership. The Committee has issued statements, organized informational pickets at yards around the country, and held successful public meetings with hundreds of their coworkers that provided them with a forum to speak without fear of being cut off or censored.

To Wallace, this is the equivalent of “destroying the very

fabric of our union movement,” which for the bureaucracy is their complete, undisturbed control over the rank and file.

What has been the record of the BLET, as well as the other 11 rail unions in this time? They have endlessly delayed strike action and are seeking to ram through an agreement that leaves in place the hated attendance policies, adds an insulting three days unpaid sick leave per year and provides wage increases below the rate of inflation.

Wallace repeats the most nauseating and absurd lie of all, when he claims: “[I]t is the membership that all union officers serve, and it is the membership that decides if they find agreements to be acceptable.” He then goes so far as to suggest that anyone who criticizes existing contracts are really attacking the membership itself: “Once a majority of the members make their democratic decision to ratify a contract, bashing that past decision is bashing the members for voting yes.”

Wallace makes this statement as the union officialdom across the industry has simply ignored 99 percent strike authorization votes and are seeking to ram through their deals in votes conducted with zero transparency. Even when forced to acknowledge serious irregularities in its vote, the IBEW refused to conduct a re-vote. When asked for more details about the vote in his union, NCFO President Dean Devita cursed a WSWs reporter and accused him of “interfering in the business of my organization.”

As far as the bureaucracy is concerned, workers’ votes only count when they vote the way the bureaucrats want them to. In those cases where workers voted down contracts, such as with the IAM, the BMWED and the BRS, the unions have simply kept workers on the job under the terms of secret agreements with management, which not a single worker approved or even knew about. They have sought to cover this up by a lie of omission, announcing only that cooling off periods “have been extended” or “now take effect,” in order to create the impression among workers that they are still legally barred from striking under the Railway Labor Act. The IAM has since “passed” a contract nearly identical to one which workers rejected in September.

If all else fails, the union apparatus leverages the threat of congressional intervention to impose the contract to convince workers that nothing can be done to oppose it. In a recent video where he appeared alongside Pierce, SMART-TD President Jeremy Ferguson told workers: “It is essential to understand that with the threat of a strike or lockout looming, the historical actions of Congress have rarely varied from the PEB recommendations, and it was clear while we were in negotiations on the 15th, that Congress would in all likelihood impose PEB 250’s recommendations before the strike deadline.”

The apparatus presents not only intervention, but even the

mere *threat* of intervention as being the end of the story. Ferguson has even constructed a pro-corporate legal theory around this which falsely claims that “The United States Constitution” bars workers from striking. This is a lie; in fact, striking is legally protected activity under the First Amendment freedom of speech and association. At the same time, both the BLET and SMART-TD invited Nancy Pelosi and Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh to recent conventions, and have delayed the vote until well after the midterms, strengthening Congress’ hand.

Wallace’s attacks on the WSWs as “outsiders” “interfering” in the election utilizes the type of language which was once used by management and pro-corporate vigilante groups against union organizers. By contrast, Marty Walsh’s statement last Friday raising Congressional intervention did not meet with a similarly angry reaction against “interference.” In fact, the BLET hardly acknowledged it.

Wallace combines this with a feeble attempt at red-baiting, denouncing the WSWs for being socialists, as though this is supposed to scare railroaders—which it has not. But this only shows the bureaucracy’s own ignorance of the history of the labor movement, on the railroads in particular, where socialists have always been at the forefront of working class movements.

One of the most outstanding, popular workers’ leaders in American history was a socialist railroader named Eugene Debs, who, after the government intervened to crush the Pullman Strike in 1894, came to the conclusion that railroaders confront not only the individual railroads but the entire capitalist system and state which defends it. If the BLET officialdom is hostile to socialism, it is because they are in allegiance with the latter against the workers.

For the union bureaucracy, workers cannot be allowed access to either the truth or the means to organize outside of the control of the apparatus. If they are lashing out, the real target is not the WSWs, but rail workers themselves. Terrified of the threat from below, the bureaucracy is worried that it is losing control of the narrative.



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