

Second rail maintenance worker dies in four days; rail workers respond to BMWED strike deadline extension, engineers' contract

Our reporters

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Do you work on the railroads? Tell us what you think about the BMWED's decision to extend its strike deadline. If you're an engineer or conductor, tell us how you and your coworkers are voting on the contracts. Contact us by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

A railroad track worker for BNSF died in southwestern Kansas on Wednesday, Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees Local 2405 confirmed on social media. The worker's name was Michael Poushyk, a trackman headquartered in Dodge City. Michael was a 49-year-old husband and father of three, who had only been hired on in August, according to the railroad.

Michael was the second maintenance of way worker to die in the US railroad industry in the space of four days. On Saturday, a worker died north of Houston, Texas in a fuel explosion.

The death in Kansas came the same day as the BMWED announced an extension of a strike deadline for 20,000 members to early December, at the request of the Biden administration. The original deadline, pegged to "five days after Congress reconvenes" or November 19, took effect after workers rejected a national contract last month, per a secret deal with the carriers to extend the "status quo" if the vote failed.

The BMWED absurdly presented this as providing the framework for unity with other rail unions, whose own self-imposed strike deadlines were already set for December. It also claimed that would give the union time to "educate" Congress, where both parties in fact have already drawn up anti-strike legislation. The delay gives Washington more time to prepare itself for a showdown with the railroaders, after a tight midterm election whose final outcome is not yet clear but which appears to have set the stage for significant political dysfunction and

crisis. The union statement falsely insinuated that workers could not strike until Congress passed legislation to explicitly allow it.

The BMWED also claimed that the extension would give 60,000 engineers and conductors, whose contract vote lasts until November 20, the "opportunity to finish their ratification procedures for any tentative national agreements without disruption." But in reality, the contract is just as unpopular among rail crews as among maintenance workers. The real reason for the delay is that impending strike action by maintenance workers would have emboldened rail crews to reject the deal as well.

Ian Jefferies, President and CEO of the Association of American Railroads, hailed the extension in almost identical terms as the BMWED, when he said, "This agreement to extend the cooling-off period affords all unionized employees the opportunity to vote on their agreements free of a looming strike threat."

Other industry groups were more explicit. Jay Timmons, the CEO of the National Association of Manufacturers, told CNBC that the extension "provides some temporary breathing room for operational and logistical planning for manufacturers and delays any rail service interruptions." He concluded, "in line with [Labor Secretary Marty Walsh's] comments yesterday, we continue urging congressional leaders to be prepared to act should a work stoppage appear imminent."

In an interview with CNBC, Union Pacific CEO Lance Fritz laughed when he was asked about the possibility of a national strike. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We've got some negotiating to do with that union and we've agreed to status quo, we're in status quo while we're doing that. I am confident we will find a way to craft an agreement that can be taken back out for ratification."

However, any deal reached under conditions where the

carriers have refused to give up anything, and the union bureaucracy is trying to deprive workers of the strike weapon, can only be a company-dictated sellout.

Railroaders across the country reacted furiously to the extension. One engineer on the West Coast said: “At the end of the day there really isn’t much to discuss. The unions are selling us out in order to go along with and not cause issues for the system. We all know it. People are pissed off about it. But this is just one more step in a long line of steps to that aim. They don’t want to rock the boat, and what they’re unwilling to admit is that they’re just one more cog in the machine—a machine that they depend upon and therefore they cannot threaten.”

A machinist from the Midwest said: “Many of us have had deep feelings of betrayal and mistrust from our union leadership. These feelings are cemented as a matter of fact when they mislead and misinform their own membership by lying about strike legality, implying we would need congressional approval to use our own voices.”

A worker at the BNSF yard in Barstow, California said, “I think it’s BS. But as we saw in this contract for us, they are playing politics with our lives. These people don’t care about us. It’s about their political party, not its members.”

“If we can’t strike, we have ZERO power!”: Engineers explain why they’re voting no

Engineers and conductors around the country have given statements to the WSWs to explain why they are voting “no” on the national contract.

One engineer explained, “It doesn’t address the glaring issue of the current attendance policies, and it would likely create a worse quality of life. The pay increase is below the current inflation rate and doesn’t even match federal programs. The big issue is quality of life.”

A CSX engineer said: “My decision to reject the proposed contract from CSX and the PEB [Presidential Emergency Board] was based on multiple issues. I think most people have rejected it based on only pay and health care cost. Those are two issues for me as well, but the attendance policy, personal/daily vacation days, call times, COLA, shift-differential, etc, are also issues of concern.

“The bottom line is that what they offered monetarily is what we were due decades ago. The raises don’t even

equal inflation. So, if you look at the proposed percentage raise for each year of the contract, it equals the amount for the bonus per each year, based on what we made four years ago. After the last contract, they needed far stronger than that!”

Another engineer in the Pacific Northwest said: “First, pay needs to reflect closer to what the job requirements and responsibilities are. Second, we need paid sick days. ALL other large corporations have earned sick time off, and for us to be denied that was a SOLID NO vote.

“We work around the clock in all-weather conditions, no matter how we feel, because we can’t afford to take days off unpaid. We shouldn’t have to burn up our vacation that we’ve earned to relax for all the on-call work we’ve done the rest of the year just to sit at home miserable.

“Third, healthcare premiums need to remain where they are—ESPECIALLY if the pay doesn’t increase to the full amount that the union was asking for in the beginning [of negotiations]. Otherwise, it negates the pay increase and we’re worse off than where we are now.

“There are plenty of other reasons as well, I also want to see the [Railway Labor Act] revamped to be fair to the laborers as much as it is to the carriers. ... It has been taken advantage of for far too long by the greedy corporations, and that needs to come to a stop.

“If we can’t strike, we have ZERO power! We’ve jumped through the hoops, climbed up all the steps required by the RLA and yet we still can’t seem to strike to get them to take us seriously. Politics have gotten so embedded into the union that the members that I’ve talked with have all lost hope in the union. Unfortunately, I’ve never had any anyways. This is my first union job and will probably be the only one I’ll ever have whether I stay working here or not.”



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