

Boilermakers become the fourth to reject national rail contract brokered by the White House

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Members of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers (IBB) have rejected a contract with the rail National Carrier Conference Committee (NCCC). The IBB, representing around 300 workers, is the fourth rail union out of 12 to reject a contract, following the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) and the Brotherhood of Railway Signalmen. The International Association of Machinists District 19 also rejected a contract in early September, but the union narrowly rammed through an almost identical deal at the start of this month.

As with the BMWED and BRS, the IBB is enforcing a “status quo” which keeps workers on the job until December 9. This extension is not due to prohibitions on “self help” under the Railway Labor Act, the last of which expired on September 16, but due to a secret deal worked out between the unions and the carriers in advance of the vote. Union officials noted that the IBB “fully expects to continue negotiating further toward a satisfactory contract in the future with the NCCC.”

The NCCC said that it was “disappointed” with the result and that it “will delay the benefits of the tentative agreement for IBB-represented employees, including an immediate 14.1% wage increase and substantial retroactive and lump sum payouts. The NCCC will remain engaged with IBB throughout the remaining cooling-off period and will continue to seek an agreement based on the framework recommended by Presidential Emergency Board 250.”

The IBB reject adds additional momentum for the defeat of the contracts for the two largest unions, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) and Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation (SMART-TD), which cover 60,000 engineers and conductors. Voting at these unions began on October 31, more than a month and a half after their deal was brokered by the White House on September 15, and continues through Sunday.

The transparent strategy of Washington, the carriers and the pro-corporate union bureaucracy has been to try to enforce the deal in spite of workers’ anger, by delaying the votes for as long as possible and to divide workers across the 12 different craft unions. In addition, the delays were meant to buy time for Congress, in the aftermath of a tightly contested midterm election, to prepare anti-strike legislation. Meanwhile, the unions have presented the “choice” which workers have as being between voting to accept the agreement, or having it unilaterally imposed upon them by Congress.

However, the efforts of the Biden administration and the union bureaucracy to prevent a strike are wearing thin. Even if only one union were to strike, regardless of how many members they have, the entire rail industry will grind to a halt as rail workers from other crafts refuse to cross picket lines.

The precariousness of the situation has sparked fear in the media and among union and government officials. Earlier this month, Labor Secretary Marty Walsh declared his support for congressional intervention against rail workers. And reporting on the BMWED and IBB contract rejections has been quick to point out the potential economic cost of a strike.

Reuters noted that a strike could cost the US economy \$2 billion a day and CNN attempted to scare readers with the possibility of empty shelves caused by a rail strike.

Notably, the NCCC and several media outlets have referred to the contract vote as a “failure” to ratify the deal.

Some of the most telling commentary on the IBB contract came from Frank Wilner for *Railway Age*. Wilner is a former SMART-TD bureaucrat and former chief of staff at the Surface Transportation Board under Bill Clinton.

Representing the interests and perspective of the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party, Wilner complained that the IBB “ has failed to ratify its recent tentative agreement ” and described the ratification of the contract by the International Association of Machinists as a “point of light.” Wilner also spoke of the BLET and SMART votes as “ratification votes,” implying that the purpose of the vote was to ratify the contract, not to democratically express worker’s voices.

The rejection underscores the need for railroaders to seize the initiative, organizing themselves to prepare for strike action by developing rank-and-file committees to countermand the betrayals of the apparatus. Railroaders must also prepare for the threat of Congressional intervention by turning outward for the broadest possible support from workers in all industries, in order to force Congress to back down.



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