

As the class struggle grows in US, another rail union rejects White House-backed contract

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Monday's rejection of a contract by members of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers (IBB) was the latest blow to the sellout national railroad agreement brokered by the White House. The IBB is the smallest of the 12 craft unions in the industry, with only 500 members, but its members were the third consecutively to reject the deal, following workers in the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employes (BMWED) and the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen (BRS) late last month.

Momentum is clearly building for the defeat of the deal, with less than a week left in voting by 60,000 engineers and conductors, who have been the center of opposition. Moreover, a strike even by the 500 IBB members would be the equivalent of a national strike of 120,000 railroaders, because workers in other crafts would honor the picket line.

Constant threats of congressional injunction and a campaign of lies and misinformation from the union bureaucracy, which has subjected workers to endless delays and broken them up by craft to break their unity, have failed to stem the tide of opposition. Workers are determined to launch a national railroad strike to end chronic overwork and uncertain working schedules, understaffing and attacks to real wages and health care benefits.

The rail union bureaucracy, however, is acting ever more shamelessly to try to sabotage the struggle. They have simply ignored 99 percent strike authorization votes and have rammed through the contract by narrow margins at seven unions in balloting marked by serious irregularities. At the request of the White House, the BMWED delayed once again its self-imposed strike deadline, the result of a secret deal with rail negotiators, to December 9.

To justify this decision, the BMWED resorted to complete fabrications that insult workers' intelligence, including the lie that workers cannot strike until Congress passes a law giving them permission—a claim which not even Congress itself has made. The unions are proving by their own actions that they are controlled by a well-heeled apparatus completely unaccountable to the rank and file, and which makes every decision in consultation with the carriers and

the White House, not workers.

An article in *Politico* yesterday, which included extensive interviews with top union officials, revealed the increasing desperation and anger of the apparatus in the face of rank-and-file opposition. One official told the outlet that the situation was “out of control,” while several others complained of the role of “social media,”—i.e., the fact that workers are organizing opposition to the contract through communications platforms not censored by the bureaucracy.

“There's going to be lessons learned going into the next round of bargaining about how we ... control the narrative a little bit better,” one top AFL-CIO official said, before catching himself and adding, “and I don't mean that in the propaganda way, I mean making sure that people have the facts.” In fact, the union bureaucracy has been the primary source of misinformation. Workers cannot take anything that comes out of their mouths at face value.

For the past several months, the bureaucracy continuously delayed everything until after the midterms. This was done apparently in the belief that the elections would provide a measure of stability to Washington, putting Congress on a stronger footing to act against railroaders, which the unions could then use to present the contract as inevitable. The choice, as the officials would have workers believe, is between voting to “accept” the contract and having it imposed upon them through an injunction.

But two things have run counter their calculations. First, the midterms have completely failed to restore “normalcy” to Washington, and instead have only opened up a new stage in the political crisis. More than a week later, the outcome of the election is still undetermined but will produce razor-thin margins in both houses, setting up parliamentary dysfunction. The vote itself was an expression of the deep antipathy that the population feels towards both parties and the entire political establishment.

No doubt a recognition of this was a primary factor behind the BMWED's extension, which was announced the day after Election Day.

The second and more decisive factor is the massive growth

of the class struggle, which is itself a fundamental driver of this political crisis and instability. The opposition of the railroaders draws strength from the fact that it is part of a broader movement of the entire working class.

- On Monday, the same day the IBB vote was released, 48,000 academic workers in the University of California system went out on strike to demand wages and benefits that keep up with inflation;

- In the United Auto Workers (of which the UC academic workers are members), socialist autoworker and presidential candidate Will Lehman is winning significant support on a platform of abolishing the bureaucracy and putting workers in control;

- In recent weeks, tens of thousands of pilots across major carriers have voted to reject sellout contracts or to authorize strike action. A nationwide series of informational pickets was also held Tuesday by flight attendants. Airline workers, like railroaders, are under the jurisdiction of the hated Railway Labor Act, which severely limits their ability to strike;

- Anger and frustration is building among 20,000 West Coast dockworkers, who have been kept on the job for months after their contract expired through the collusion of the ILWU union with the port operators and the White House, under a “no strike” deal similar to the “status quo” extensions in the rail industry;

- Major battles are just over the horizon. Next year, national contracts expire for autoworkers at Ford, GM and Stellantis, and for 250,000 UPS workers.

Developments in the United States are part of a world movement. Workers have launched strikes in French oil refineries, British railroads and ports and other key industries. Last week, educators in Ontario, Canada launched a province-wide strike which won significant support from workers across that country.

There is enormous potential for a unified struggle of railroaders with workers in other key industries. The threat of congressional action or other attempts to deny workers the basic democratic right to strike must be answered by a fight to mobilize the entire working class in defense of the railroaders.

For the ruling class, much more than a contract is at stake, but the entire strategy of the Biden administration, which is to use the union bureaucracy to keep a lid on the class struggle. Biden’s claims to be the most “labor-friendly president in American history” means he wants to make use of the services of a union apparatus that long ago completely integrated itself with corporate America and the state.

But both the government and the union bureaucracy are deeply hated by and isolated from the working class. Moreover, a breakthrough by workers against this “united

front” in any industry could rapidly embolden workers across the country to push for their own demands. This, even more than the impact on the “economy”—that is, to profits—is what the ruling class fears about a rail strike, and why they will stop at nothing to try to prevent it.

Railroaders face determined adversaries. Congress, in spite of the midterm results, is still preparing anti-strike legislation behind closed doors, and the union bureaucracy will stop at nothing to betray the railroaders. The outcome of the engineers’ and conductors’ votes is by no means certain, and the experience with the IBEW vote shows that the unions will not stop even at outright ballot fraud to “pass” deeply hated contracts.

But recent events testify to the immense strength of the working class, as well as the fragility of the institutions upon which the ruling class has relied for so long to suppress workers’ opposition.

This, however, requires independent organization and direction. The fight to mobilize and unite the working class against their common enemies is inseparable from the fight to free them from the stranglehold of the union apparatus. This means, above all, the formation of rank-and-file committees, democratic structures which put control of the struggle into the hands of workers, and gives them the means to countermand decisions which violate the will of the membership.

The logic of this fight extends further into a general fight against the profit system itself, which is incompatible with solving even a single social problem on a progressive basis. The basic question which is raised is: who runs society? Workers must take power into their own hands and restructure economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit. This is the program of socialism.



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