

Corporate media fears rail strike as major unions close contract vote

Alex Findijs

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Roughly half of all US railroaders are voting on a contract brokered by the Biden administration to avert a strike in September. The two largest rail unions, BLET and SMART-TD, delayed their votes until November and extended their strike cool-down deadline to December 9. The results of the voting are expected to be announced on Monday.

Three of the 12 rail unions have rejected their deals, while seven of the smaller unions have reportedly approved their contracts. Even if only one union were to go on strike, all others are expected to respect the picket lines, bringing the bulk of US rail transport to a halt.

The potential for a rail strike, which the Biden administration, rail carriers and union leaders have been adamant they wish to avoid, has thrown the corporate media into a frenzy of concern. All across the country major media outlets are suddenly raising the specter of a rail strike and the disruption it would cause to corporate profits.

Several outlets have quoted estimates of a \$2 billion per day loss in economic activity, with CNBC warning that the US economy was “at risk.” Attempting to scare an American populace that is suffering rampant inflation, CNBC quoted Jon Gold, vice president of supply chain and customs policy of the National Retail Federation, who said, “A rail strike in December would potentially impact holiday goods, as well as shipments for spring merchandise that retailers are already starting to bring in.”

CNBC further stretched the economic costs by citing a report from the American Chemistry Council, estimating a “month-long strike resulting in an overall hit to the economy of \$160 billion, or one percentage point of GDP, and [a] rise in a key inflation index, the Producer Price Index, of 4%.”

The reference to increased inflation, in particular, is an attempt to divide the working class and pit railroaders against other workers. This is a crucial effort by the ruling class to avoid any rail strike from developing into a broader strike movement.

Politico went even further, claiming, “If unions don’t get members on board by the end of an industry-wide cooling-off period Dec. 9, just one could spark a strike that capsizes the nation’s supply chain—stripping store shelves, starving livestock and compromising drinking water.”

Blaming workers for any shortages caused by a strike betrays the facts of the matter, that the rail carriers have reaped massive profits at the expense of their workforce. Even the corporate press has been forced to acknowledge this, including references to the sick leave and quality of life issues that plague the industry.

Freight Waves quoted Martin Oberman, chair of the Surface Transportation Board (STB), who blamed rail carriers for putting themselves in this position by slashing their workforce for years. He noted that Class 1 carriers cut their workforce by 29,000 people from 2016 to 2020, and noted that the carriers saved \$5 billion in payroll, just one-twelfth of what they gave to investors through stock buybacks and dividends.

Oberman is correct that it is the carriers that are to blame for service issues across the country. However, he is not representing the interests of workers with these remarks, but that of the middle class and the industries that rely on rail freight transport. He is a longtime figure in the Chicago Democratic Party and was hand-picked by Biden to chair the STB.

What Oberman represents is the anxiety among parts of the media and ruling class that the carriers have overplayed their hand and that sympathy among workers for lack of sick time and personal time off

work will develop into more politically conscious solidarity and organization in the working class. For Oberman and figures like him, the answer to the rail crisis is to throw workers a bone, to hire a few more hands and give a couple more sick days, and get the contracts ratified before the situation develops beyond control.

This is the outlook of the union bureaucrats as well. Several union officials interviewed by *Politico* expressed hostility to the opposition to the contracts. Jared Cassity, SMART-TD's alternative national legislative director, said "There are factions out there on social media ... actively campaigning against this thing, with no thought on the merit." Jeremy Ferguson, SMART-TD president, added, "I can tell right away who the 'no' votes are" and start "explaining how it works. 'We're at the end. This is it. We're out of runway, guys.'"

Workers do not need to have the process explained to them, nor are they criticizing the contract without thought. Thousands of workers are rightfully angry and upset with the union officials for failing to bring back an agreement that meets their needs. Not only that, but these bureaucrats have continuously delayed and undermined the 99 percent strike authorization that workers have already given. The issue is with the contract, not workers' understanding of what is inside it.

Worker opposition has placed the prospect of a strike front and center. CNN Business attempted to reassure its corporate audience that a strike could still be avoided if the contracts were rejected. It interviewed Ian Jefferies, CEO of industry the Association of American Railroads, who claimed, "There's absolutely opportunities if a ratification fails the first time to sit down and come to additional agreements and put that out and get the [tentative agreement] ratified." Jeffries added that if ratification were to fall through, "Congress has shown a willingness historically to intervene if necessary."

The threat of congressional intervention has been levied against rail workers continuously, by both the carriers and the union leadership. Both sides have claimed that they do not want Congress to intervene, but both understand that any congressional intervention would result in the imposition of the proposal of the Presidential Emergency Board chosen by Biden, which

is the basis of the contracts in question and which favors the demands of the carriers. Union leaders in particular have leveraged the potential for congressional intervention against workers calling for strike action, claiming that there is no point in fighting for better conditions because Congress has the final say.

But the struggle of workers in Ontario, Canada against the reactionary anti-strike law shows that the working class has great power to fight against government restriction of the right to strike. The walk-out of education support workers quickly grew towards a general strike in Ontario, before it was sold out in backroom deals between the Conservative provincial government and the unions.

By organizing across craft and industry lines, rail workers and the working class at large can take matters into their own hands and fight for what they deserve. Only the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee has taken up this struggle to fight for what workers need, not what Congress and the union apparatus says they can have.



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