

Largest US rail union rejects White House-brokered tentative agreement, setting stage for historic strike

Jacob Crosse
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Fight for your right to strike now! The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee will be holding an emergency meeting this Wednesday, November 23, 2022, at 7 p.m EST / 4 p.m. PST. Register here.

After a month of voting, on Monday morning the two largest rail unions, SMART-TD and BLET announced in a joint-statement that members of SMART-TD, the largest rail union, rejected the White House-brokered tentative agreement. The statement claimed that the BLET agreement barely passed.

Together, the two unions encompass nearly half of the 115,000 railroaders in the US. While the statement did not give a full breakdown of the vote totals, it reported that members of the Transportation Division of the Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers (SMART-TD) voted down the contract by a margin of 50.87 percent.

Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) members reportedly accepted the agreement by a margin of 53.5 percent in favor and 46.5 percent against, while a separate section of SMART-TD yardmaster members, numbering roughly 1,300, voted in favor of the agreement by 62 percent.

In addition to SMART-TD, members of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers (IBB), Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) and the Brotherhood of Railway Signalmen (BRS) have also rejected their agreements.

A “cooling off” period, unilaterally agreed to by the

BRS bureaucracy, is set to expire on December 5. If one union goes on strike, the rest of the rail unions have pledged to honor the picket line and shut down the entire rail network.

For over three years, including through the pandemic, railroad workers have labored and died without a contract, and no pay raises. While workers have suffered, the Class I carriers and their owners have reaped billions in profits. Thousands of workers have left the industry either through attrition, injury or retirement as the carriers have implemented profit-driven scheduling systems, known as Hi-Viz and Precision Scheduled Railroading. These systems have further decimated workers’ health and home-lives.

This past summer, rail workers voted by a 99.5 percent margin to strike. Since that vote, the union bureaucracies, working closely with the Biden White House and the carriers, have conspired to keep workers on the job, while trying to force through carrier-friendly agreements patterned after Biden’s Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) recommendations. These agreements do nothing to address railroaders’ demands, ensuring the continued enrichment of Wall Street.

The rejection of the agreement, despite threats from carriers, Congress and the media, demonstrates the resolve of workers. Terrified at the prospect that workers might strike in less than three weeks, in a statement issued on Monday, Association of American Railroads President and CEO Ian Jefferies called on Congress to “be prepared to act and avoid a disastrous

\$2 billion a day hit to our economy.”

Picking up where Jefferies left off, in the statement Monday announcing the vote SMART-TD President Jeremy Ferguson stressed that the rejection of the agreement does not mean a strike is inevitable and, in fact, is something he, unlike the members he claims to represent, adamantly opposes.

“This can all be settled through negotiations and without a strike,” wrote Ferguson. “A settlement would be in the best interests of the workers, the railroads, shippers and the American people.”

In fact, a settlement negotiated by Ferguson, Pierce, the Biden White House, Congress and the carriers, behind the backs of workers, would not be in their best interests as evidenced by the previously negotiated tentative agreements and PEB recommendations that have been rejected.

To oppose this conspiracy and democratically carry out the will of the membership to strike for what they deserve, railroad workers across crafts and carriers have established the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The committee will be holding another online public meeting on Wednesday.

The razor thin margins announced on Monday belie the amount of resistance among rank-and-file railroaders to the agreements. On social media and in interviews with the *World Socialist Web Site*, many railroad workers said that they voted “yes,” not out of support for the agreement, but because they have no faith in the union leadership to carry out a struggle that will actually win their demands for paid sick time off, a freeze on medical costs, pay increases and more consistent scheduling.

Several workers have reported to the *World Socialist Web Site* that members did not receive ballots and were unable to vote.

Derek, a carman with almost 30 years experience in Barstow, California, explained that he and other workers voted against the agreement because it would increase workers’ medical costs, force the

implementation of the Automatic Bid Scheduling System, and contains pitiful “raises” that do not keep pace with inflation.

“I know everyone at my terminal voted it down, and they want to strike,” Derek said. He added that while workers overwhelmingly want to strike, “[SMART-TD President] Ferguson obviously does not want a strike.”

Derek confirmed that, despite the prolonged voting process, many younger members at his yard did not receive ballots and were unable to cast their “no” vote in opposition to the agreement. He said that when some members came to him recently asking for information about how to get a ballot, he told them to call the international to request one.

Derek said that these workers were told by the international that the “cutoff date” had passed and that it was “too late” to send ballots.

They were “not in the system so they don’t get to vote,” Derek said.

“Whoever was in charge of updating their systems to send out the ballots did not do so. That is why a lot of people were not able to vote,” he added. He said that the carriers “have been hiring a lot of people the last four or five months” and many of those workers did not receive ballots.

Another SMART-TD member told the WSWs: “I never received a ballot. I had to request a digital code to vote by phone last week.”

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