

US railroaders' vote against contract sets stage for conflict with capitalist state, union bureaucracy

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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.

The vote by tens of thousands of conductors and yardmen in SMART-TD to reject a White House-brokered contract is a major milestone in the class struggle. What is emerging in the United States, the center of world capitalism, is the biggest movement of the working class in decades.

SMART-TD is the fourth and by far the largest of the 12 rail unions to have rejected the deal, patterned after the recommendations by a White House-picked mediation board. (Workers in the International Association of Machinists [IAM] rejected the contract in the initial vote, but the union claimed its narrow passage on a re-vote earlier this month.) Together, these four unions have a membership of nearly two-thirds of the 120,000 total railroad workers.

In a parallel announcement Monday, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) claimed narrow ratification of the same deal.

The real level of opposition to the deal is significantly higher than the narrow 1 percent margin of rejection. The vote took place after two months of deliberate delays by the union bureaucracy, which tried to ensure its passage by bleeding off steam and falsely presenting the vote as a “choice” between either accepting the deal or having it imposed upon the workers by Congress. Those who did vote “yes” did so because they had no confidence whatsoever in the union apparatus to organize a fight. What’s more, as with many other votes by rail unions over the past two months, many workers reported to the WSWs that they never received ballots.

The vote was a show of defiance by the rank and file against the union apparatus, the American state and the rail carriers, all of whom endorsed the deal and have devoted all their energy for weeks towards ensuring its passage. Indeed, the day after it was reached in September, President Biden took a victory lap through the media, claiming that he had averted a national rail strike.

But railroaders refused to stay “on message.” They are

determined not to back down from demands which cannot wait any longer, including paid sick time and predictable working schedules that allow them to spend time with their families. They are prepared to conduct a national strike to fight for what they need.

The vote is a major blow to the authority of both the Biden administration and the White House itself as an institution. Under the guise of being the “most union-friendly president in American history,” the Biden administration has pursued a deliberate policy of using the services of the corrupt union apparatus to prevent the outbreak of strikes and curb wage growth by enforcing substandard contracts. On the railroads, Biden sought to replicate the “successes” that he scored earlier this year in the refinery industry, as well as on the West Coast docks, where 20,000 workers have been kept on the job since July without a contract.

However, railroaders are challenging more than just the policy of the current administration. They are combatting the entire structure of “labor relations” as it has evolved over the past 40 years, the central feature of which has been the complete integration of the unions with the state and the corporations. The job of the union bureaucrats, which they have dutifully and ruthlessly carried out and for which they have been handsomely rewarded with billions of dollars in corporate stock, has been to help force through massive cuts and suppress all working class opposition.

Under this framework, the living standards of the working class were thrown back by a century, while inequality reached its highest levels on record. Now it is buckling under the stress of decades’ worth of pent-up social anger which can no longer be postponed.

During the last week of voting on the railroads, 50,000 graduate students in California and New York City went out on strike to demand massive pay increases to cover skyrocketing rent and cost of living. They are members of the United Auto Workers, where Will Lehman, a socialist and Mack Trucks worker, is running for union president on a platform of abolishing the bureaucracy and establishing rank-and-file control.

Since the rail contract was first proposed in September, tens of thousands of pilots and other airline workers have voted to reject contracts and authorize strikes. Like railroaders, they are under the jurisdiction of the anti-worker Railway Labor Act. While the corporate press and the union bureaucracy present this as a “disaster” that would hurt “the economy,” tens of millions of workers would welcome and support a rail strike and would take it as the signal to push for their own demands.

As significant as this would be, the situation on the rails is only part of a broader development and only one of any number of potential “tipping points.” Next year, contracts expire for autoworkers—where rank-and-file opposition forced a national strike at GM in 2019—and for 250,000 UPS workers, where the Teamsters bureaucracy was only able to ram through a deal in 2018 by overriding a majority “no” vote.

This is part of an international movement. The start of the year saw massive protests in the South Asian island country of Sri Lanka against inflation, which forced the resignation of the government. In the advanced capitalist countries, rail and port workers have carried out strikes in Britain, truckers in South Korea, refinery workers in France and countless others. Two weeks ago, tens of thousands of educators in Ontario, Canada carried out a provincewide strike in defiance of an anti-strike law.

As this movement builds, the state is compelled to intervene directly against the working class, demonstrating that it is not a neutral arbiter but an instrument of class domination. Almost immediately after Monday’s vote results, railroad trade groups reiterated calls for Congress to intervene to impose the deal. Congress is now in “lame-duck” session less than two months before the Republicans take control of the House of Representatives following the midterms. However, both parties have signaled their bipartisan support for action against the railroaders.

This process is universal. Continuing strikes in Britain were a major factor in the downfall of Tory Prime Minister Liz Truss in favor of her unelected replacement Rishi Sunak, a super-wealthy hedge fund manager. In France, “president of the rich” Emmanuel Macron has deployed riot police against strikers, and in Sri Lanka, the new unelected President Ranil Wickremesinghe is pledged to a program of IMF austerity.

Faced with opposition from below, the unions are not yielding to pressure but circling the wagons with the state. In Ontario, the Canadian unions called off the educators’ strike at precisely the point when support was building for a general strike to force the provincial government to back down from its anti-strike threats. Meanwhile, south of the border, congressional intervention is being coordinated directly with the bureaucracy itself, which delayed the strike deadlines until after the midterms to buy Congress time while inviting Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh and outgoing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to last month’s BLET national convention.

No doubt, Congress and the unions hope that the deal can still

be pushed through without having to resort to open congressional intervention. Strike action has been delayed by the unions until December 9, under secret agreements reached with the carriers without the consent of railroaders. The bureaucracy may interpret the narrow margin of rejection as meaning they may be able to ram the deal through in a re-vote, as they did in the IAM. However it was worked through, with daily input from Washington, this would still be a government injunction in all but name.

What happens next depends not only on what Congress and the bureaucracy do but what workers do. They cannot allow this struggle to remain strangled by the bureaucracy. They must take matters into their own hands, by expanding the work of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee (RWRFC), which has led the opposition to the union apparatus.

The RWRFC is the basis for countermanding actions that violate the will of railroaders and appealing for the broadest possible support in the working class. Any attempt to impose a contract without workers’ consent, or through a sham vote, is a fundamental attack on the rights of all workers and another step towards dictatorship in the United States. It must be opposed by all workers.

Battle lines are being drawn. On the one side stand the capitalist governments, the major corporations and the union bureaucracy. On the other hand stands the working class, the majority of world’s society, which creates all wealth and is united across national boundaries by common interests founded in the global system of production itself.

Workers have powerful enemies, but they are more powerful. The problem, however, is to know how to wield that power. Above all, what the railroad struggle has revealed is that workers are in a fight not just against individual corporations but the profit system of exploitation itself.

Railroad workers: Take up the fight for rank-and-file control! Join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee by sending an email to railwrfc@gmail.com, texting (314) 529-1064.



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