

What Biden and Congress' move to ban railroad strike reveals

Tom Hall

29 November 2022

The move by Washington to override a clear vote by railroaders to reject a White House-brokered contract and impose it unilaterally is a major assault on the basic democratic rights of the working class. It is also a strategic experience, the lessons of which workers must learn.

After three years of endless rounds of government-mandated mediation, imposed on railroaders by the anti-worker Railway Labor Act, and after an earlier settlement that the government and union bureaucracy sought to enforce in a vote subject to endless delays and marred by serious irregularities, workers were finally set to launch a national strike on December 9. Workers face brutal employers who refuse to budge on essential and basic demands, such as paid sick leave (workers currently have none at all) and scheduling that allows them to spend time with their families.

Instead, the Biden administration and Congress are moving rapidly to ban strike action and impose the deal. Biden announced Monday night that he would seek congressional intervention, and he met with congressional leaders Tuesday morning. A vote in Congress, where the move is supported by the leadership of both parties, could take place as soon as Wednesday morning.

The struggle of the railroaders to win their demands has proved two fundamental elements of Marxism, which lay at the heart of its theory of the class struggle.

First, it demonstrates the correctness of the labor theory of value—that the source of all society's wealth is the labor of the working class, and the source of profits is the surplus value extracted from the exploitation of workers. This is the economic source of exploitation in capitalist society.

Earlier this year, during arguments before a federal mediation board, the railroads arrogantly argued that

railroaders' labor "did not contribute to their profits." But Monday, 400 business groups penned a letter demanding Congress act to prevent a strike, warning of apocalyptic economic consequences if railroaders stopped working.

In the United States, the most socially unequal of all the advanced economies, cults of personality are developed around celebrity billionaires, who are promoted as "job creators." But all of these people are socially useless. The country can function without them—but not without the railroaders.

It is no accident that the most profitable industry in the US is also home to some of the worst working conditions. Through continuous job cuts, forced overtime and other methods, massive levels of surplus value are pumped out of railroaders' labor by the hedge fund managers and billionaires who own the industry. This profit in turn finances stock buybacks and other speculative and parasitic activity.

Second, it proves the character of the state as an instrument of class rule. "The executive of the modern state," Marx wrote more than 150 years ago, "is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie."

Both parties are coming together with record speed to force through an agreement rejected by workers. Even the civil war atmosphere in Washington, where the bulk of Republicans supported an attempted coup to keep Trump in power, has so far proven to be no barrier to bipartisan unity.

No other piece of major legislation in recent memory will have been passed so quickly in Congress, perhaps save two: the CARES Act bailout in 2020, which shoveled trillions of dollars to Wall Street and the major corporations in the opening phases of the pandemic, and the bills to fund the proxy war against

Russia in Ukraine. Even when at each others' throats, the Democrats and Republicans come together on critical issues to American imperialism and the capitalist ruling class.

President Biden, who has assigned himself the pretentious label of the "most labor-friendly president in American history," claims with nauseating hypocrisy that he regrets imposing the contract, but that it is necessary to protect "working families" who would be hurt by a strike. But this supposed danger could just as easily be resolved by imposing terms favorable to workers.

Instead, Biden has explicitly rejected any amendments to the contract. In the name of "protecting working people," Biden is enforcing a managerial dictatorship on working people.

What Biden and Congress really mean when they speak of protecting the "economy" is protecting profits. These must be defended at all costs. Even a semblance of retreat is intolerable because it would encourage further opposition in the working class.

The bourgeois state is not, as reformists habitually assert, a neutral arbiter of social conflict. It is an instrument that upholds the political dictatorship of the capitalist class.

In imposing the dictates of the corporations, the Biden administration has relied on the critical services of the trade union apparatus, which is entirely complicit in the anti-democratic conspiracy against railroad workers. From the beginning, it sought to undermine workers' initiative and delay as long as possible. It was the unions that pushed for the appointment of the Presidential Emergency Board, which is the basis for the contract that Biden is now trying to impose.

The union apparatus tried unsuccessfully to impose the agreement through voting that made a mockery of democratic procedure, while delaying a confrontation in order to strengthen Congress' hand. They used the threat of a congressional injunction as a weapon against workers to try to convince them to accept the deal on the grounds that nothing else could be done.

The union apparatus is not only an extension of management; it exists as an industrial police force for the capitalist state.

While the legislation would be the first time Congress has intervened against a national rail strike since 1991, it is not simply a repeat of the past. It unfolds under

conditions of massive social, political and economic crisis.

Biden's request for congressional intervention is the beginning of the end of his attempts to camouflage his class policy and avoid open and premature confrontations with the working class, through the use of the union bureaucracy. This strategy is foundering against the immense alienation and hostility that workers feel towards both the union apparatus and the government.

There is a growing movement for the development of rank-and-file organizations through which workers can fight for their interests independently of the trade union apparatus. Among rail workers, this has taken the form of the Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which has played the leading role in mobilizing and organizing opposition to the contracts across trades and companies.

At the same time, the campaign of Will Lehman for UAW president, based on a program of abolishing the UAW apparatus and transferring power to the shop floor, has found broad support among rank-and-file workers.

The congressional intervention, however, demonstrates the critical importance of the independence of the working class. This means not only breaking the straitjacket of the union bureaucracy, but also establishing the workers' political independence. Workers are completely disfranchised by a political system that functions as an instrument of class rule of the bourgeoisie. Workers need their own political program, corresponding to their own historic interests, which collide with and are destined to abolish the profit motive.

Workers are being confronted with the need to take political power into their own hands and restructure society on socialist lines, reorganizing it according to human need, not profit. This is the most fundamental lesson of the congressional intervention.



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