Democrats move to ban rail strike, impose settlement opposed by workers

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The vote by the House of Representatives Wednesday morning to ban a nationwide rail strike and impose a White House-backed settlement on 120,000 rail workers is an historic political event. The Democratic Party, which controls the House and drove the vote, has openly displayed its class role as the instrument of corporate America against the working class.

The Biden administration looked on in horror as rail workers voted to reject the settlement it had devised in collaboration with Wall Street, the rail corporations and their union servants. Now this government, which prattles endlessly about "freedom" and "democracy" around the world, is moving to ruthlessly suppress the democratic rights of the rail workers. According to the White House and Congress, workers do not have the right to vote on the terms of their employment, or the right to strike if the corporate bosses refuse to make an acceptable offer.

The mantra repeated by the Democratic and Republican politicians and the corporate media is that a rail strike must be prevented because it will damage "the economy." No such argument has been made to stop profit-gouging by the oil companies, or factory shutdowns, or the slashing of wages and benefits by corporate employers, all of which certainly damage the economic interests of working people.

By "economy," the representatives of big business mean "profits." Wall Street signaled its approval by rising sharply following the House vote.

The rail bosses claim they cannot afford to meet the demands of workers, even elementary necessities like paid sick leave, available to 78 percent of all US workers according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. These claims of poverty are ludicrous, coming from the most profitable industry in America, controlled by the banks and billionaires like Warren Buffett. The rail bosses can pay, but they do not want to.

That is because the issue is not just the immediate interests of the rail companies, but the entire class strategy of the American bourgeoisie. This strategy has been based on continuing the inflation of asset values—stocks, bonds and other paper holdings—while suppressing any wages movement in the working class.

The monetary policy of the Federal Reserve, the US central bank, clearly expresses this class strategy. The Fed has systematically raised interest rates this year, citing as its main concern the tightness of the labor market, which would ordinarily find expression in a rise in wages. The Fed is using higher rates to promote a recession, increase unemployment, and thus counteract any wages movement in the working class.

A breakthrough by an important section of workers, such as in rail, would threaten to trigger a far wider offensive by the working class, whose rising militancy has been revealed in contract rejections and in strikes by university workers, health workers, transport workers and sections of industrial workers.

This class necessity explains the remarkable speed of passage of this anti-worker legislation, which was publicly proposed by Biden on Monday evening, passed by the House on Wednesday morning, and set to be discussed by the Senate Democrats at a Thursday lunch. The ban on a rail strike is likely to become law by the weekend.

Only two other pieces of legislation have achieved such rapid passage in recent years: the rescue plan for the banks and corporations, enacted in March 2020 at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic by congressional Democrats and Republicans working together and signed into law by Donald Trump; and the emergency military and financial aid to Ukraine, rushed through this year to bolster the US-NATO war against Russia.

Congress is an impenetrable barrier when it comes to enacting legislation that would in any way support the democratic rights and social necessities of American working people. But when it comes to the key interests of the American ruling elite, at home and abroad, the supposedly deadlocked Congress reveals itself as a swift and savage instrument of class rule.

In the 2020 campaign and after, Biden proclaimed himself the most "pro-union" president in history. By that he meant

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he would rely on the apparatus of the AFL-CIO to control and discipline the working class and compel it to accept the dictates of big business. But Biden, like the corporate elite which he serves, has concluded that the rail union bureaucracy will not be able by itself to suppress the movement of the rank and file. Hence the need for the unfettered use of state power against rail workers.

The Democratic Party's entire House leadership—the retiring trio of octogenarians, Nancy Pelosi, Steny Hoyer and James Clyburn, and their chosen successors, Hakeem Jeffries, Katherine Clark and Pete Aguilar—backed the bill.

The vast majority of the Democratic Party's "left" wing voted for the anti-strike legislation as well, including Pramila Jayapal, chair of the House Progressive Caucus; Ro Khanna, former chairman of the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign; and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the media celebrity and member of the Democratic Socialists of America. None of them spoke in the debate, presumably hoping to escape notice and preserve their progressive credentials in order to continue to scam the working class.

While the bill passed the House by 290-137, virtually all the members, Democratic and Republican, supported imposing the terms set by Biden's Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) and banning a strike. The Republicans, however, were up in arms over a second bill, offered by the Democratic leadership to provide a fig leaf for the strikebreaking bill, by adding seven days of paid sick leave to the terms set by the PEB. The debate on the strike ban revolved entirely around the sick leave plan, which Republicans characterized as a "poison pill." A majority of them opposed the strikebreaking bill as a show of opposition to the sick leave plan.

Speakers for both parties lauded the terms set by the PEB, using language that went beyond even the lies rolled out by union officials in their campaign for ratification. One Republican congressman described the PEB plan as providing "very generous" provisions for health care and wages which were "going to set an average wage and benefits compensation level at more than $160,000 a year." Another said that by the end of the four-year deal, "the average wages for rail workers will reach $110,000 per year with total compensation averaging $160,000." He concluded, "It's unthinkable that the four railroad unions are holding the nation economically hostage."

In decades past, the suppression of rail workers has followed the terms laid down in the anti-democratic Railway Labor Act of 1926, which effectively stripped workers in that industry of the right to strike, a prohibition later extended to the airlines. Workers are tied to their jobs through an elaborate process of negotiation, mediation and federal intervention, which ends either with an agreement on industry terms, enforced by the pro-corporate unions, or an agreement dictated in Washington, by a PEB or Congress, and accepted by the unions as an unalterable fact.

This reactionary ritual has been disrupted by the growth of rank-and-file militancy and especially by the emergence of a new form of working class organization, the Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee, established with the assistance of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party. This committee has played the leading role in mobilizing and organizing opposition to the contracts and uniting rail workers across trades and companies. Hundreds of workers have attended its online meetings and many have joined in public protests against the PEB deal, including pickets at rail facilities.

The vote by the House of Representatives demonstrates that rail workers face a struggle, not just against the huge rail corporations and the ossified bureaucracy of 12 rail unions, but against the capitalist government of the United States. This means they are engaged in a political struggle, in which the central task is to break with the political straitjacket of the corporate-controlled two-party system.

These enemies are uncompromising in their ferocious hostility to the rail workers, but they are operating from a position of weakness while the rail workers occupy a position of enormous strength. This stems not only from their critical position in the US and world economy, but from the tremendous support and sympathy they will arouse from other workers from the very first moment they take the road of independent struggle for their own class interests. A rail strike in America would become a beacon for workers around the world.

The central issue is for rail workers to understand the realities of the present confrontation. The rail bosses and the Biden administration are weak, but conscious of their weakness. That is their advantage.

Rail workers do not sufficiently understand the strength of their own position, and that is their disadvantage, reinforced by the deliberate sabotage of the old and outmoded union organizations. This struggle must go forward through the development of new forms of organization, rank-and-file committees in every workshop and railroad terminus, and through the development of a new political leadership among rail workers, based on a socialist program.

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