

At online rally, railroad workers and their supporters discuss way forward after anti-strike law

Our reporter
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To join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email railwrfc@gmail.com or text (314) 529-1064.

The Railroad Worker Rank-and-File Committee held a successful online rally Tuesday, “Defend the railroad workers! Down with Washington’s illegitimate anti-strike law!”

More than 400 people registered, making it the best-attended event held by the committee since September 14. That meeting was held the night before the Biden administration brokered a contract with the union bureaucracy to avert a strike, which workers later voted down only to have it unilaterally imposed by Biden and Congress last week.

The attendees included railroad workers and their supporters in industries all across the country, including graduate students, health care workers, dockworkers, teachers, autoworkers and others. Turnout was bolstered by the fact that the RWRFC’s latest statement went viral on Twitter over the weekend.

The meeting was opened with remarks by *World Socialist Web Site* writer Tom Hall, who reviewed the events of the past week. “All factions in Washington, including both right and nominally left, came together to pass this slave charter,” he said, stressing in particular the role of Bernie Sanders and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in ensuring its swift passage. Hall also stressed the role of the union bureaucracy in strengthening Congress’ hand, citing a statement by the SMART-TD union upholding Congress’ “authority” and pathetically thanking “the President, House Speaker, Senate leadership, and Cabinet members for their support.”

“We know that a lot of people are thinking about what they should do,” Hall concluded. “There are those who believe that the time has come for a walkout in the railroad industry. Whatever happens, this is a decision which can only be made by workers themselves. Not the bureaucracy, not Congress.” He urged workers to “organize meetings and discussions with your coworkers, and decide what you are going to do.”

This was followed by a powerful contribution by a machinist and leading member of the RWRFC. Tonight’s meeting “is being held in the midst of a war,” he explained. “A war being waged not only against the railroad workers, but workers all across the US and abroad.”

The anti-strike law “has damning implications” for “the working class as a whole,” he warned. “The most recent events in Congress leave no doubt that they act in unison with the mega railroad profiteers in a front against our First Amendment right to strike and fundamental human rights. I ask you: Is this struggle only about sick days? Hell no! It is about bringing real fundamental change to the institutions, and dismantling the corporate, government and union-bureaucratic suppression of the workers, including of the right to withhold our labor.

“It has never been more clear that this is a class war. So I know, the big question for everyone here is: What are we going to do about it? The simple answer is, it’s up to the will of the rank-and-file. I believe this is a turning point in the fight, and whatever strategy going forward must be a methodical, well-planned and organized one... A strategy that dissects the history of the failed workers’ movements and revolutions so that we do not repeat them. One that also recognizes the victories of the past, and applies them to this one.”

“We must come together as an intelligent working class front against the imperialist bourgeoisie,” he concluded. “This type of change sometimes comes in waves, and we should not be impatient... But also, recognize that sometimes change can happen quickly, and we must be ready to act and respond, and remain steadfast.”

Another RWRFC member, an electrician from Nebraska, also spoke. “Somebody in upper management said that labor does not contribute to profits... [but] if us electricians, machinists, if we weren’t there doing our jobs, how could they even begin to make profit?”

If workers “don’t stand up now, this is going to be repeated. It will happen all the time. These companies will keep doing the same thing over and over again,” he continued.

“We’re fighting people who we outnumber 10,000 to one. Their greed has taken over, and they don’t want to give anyone anything, especially if you’re a worker like I am.”

He concluded, “If all of us stand up, we can win! We can win this battle. We could actually win the war against them.”

Later on in the meeting, another railroad worker underlined this point. “I say we use our strength. We know we have

strength. What we have that is different from in the past... is our technology and our ability to communicate. This should be taken advantage of, and we should reach out to all other [workers] everywhere, and definitely encourage a general strike.”

Tom Mackaman, a labor historian from Kings College, also addressed the meeting, reviewing the history of the class struggle on the US railroads, which includes the Great Railway Strike of 1877, the Pullman strike of 1894 and others. Mackaman explained there were three outstanding lessons. First, “no step forward was ever taken without the railroad workers uniting across all trades, the lines, hubs and regions. But this has always encountered its first obstacle in the existing unions,” which have been organized along narrow craft lines since the 1860s. This was because the unity of railroaders threatened the privileges of the union bureaucracy, he explained.

Second, the “the state, the American government, is not a neutral arbiter,” but an instrument of class rule that has intervened time and again for 150 years on the side of the railroads against the workers. Mackaman reviewed numerous examples in which the government used injunctions, anti-strike laws and even military force to prevent or break strikes by railroad workers.

Third, Mackaman concluded, “the great potential strength of the railroad workers arises from the strategic position they occupy in the American economy.” It is to “the rest of the working class, suffering from the same conditions as you, to whom you should direct your appeal.”

Workers from other industries then spoke to give support to the railroaders. Elizabeth, a nurse from California, said, “Just like railroaders, there is growing anger among health care workers, who are being pushed to their breaking point by a health care system that is collapsing... Nurses are pleading for help, but the political establishment and public agencies are not listening because they are behind this catastrophe.”

“I know firsthand how the unions tie the working class to the Democratic Party, because it happened to me when I was involved as a union representative,” she explained. “I campaigned for Bernie Sanders and single payer health care, but realized I was used as a nurse when Bernie conceded to Biden. It was a slap in the face.” The union bureaucracy and the Democrats “are not friends of labor. They are instruments of capitalism, and that will never change.”

Savannah, who has taken part in the strike by 50,000 graduate students at the University of California, also spoke. She described the poverty conditions facing grad students, who pay “40, 50 or even 60 percent of their income” in rent, at one of the most “prestigious universities in the world.”

Now that the United Auto Workers union is attempting to ram through a sellout contract, she said, “I am beginning to see how the union is riddled with bureaucracy and neoliberal hegemonic powers... I’m here to show my support and solidarity with

railroad workers and all workers across the country. Right now we are facing a bipartisan attack on workers.”

Will Lehman, a rank-and-file autoworker running for the UAW presidency on a platform of abolishing the union apparatus, also spoke about the union election, in which the UAW bureaucracy deliberately suppressed voter turnout to less than 10 percent. This only proved that the way forward was not through efforts to change the composition of the union apparatus, but the development of a rank-and-file movement to challenge its power.

Many others spoke in the meeting, including Donna, a teacher from Tennessee, who connected the fight on the railroads with the fight of educators against deteriorating conditions in schools, and Robert Stevens, a writer for the WSWS from Britain, who spoke about the series of rail strikes in the United Kingdom, which the government of Rishi Sunak is working with the bureaucracy to suppress.

Towards the end of the meeting, David North, chairman of the Socialist Equality Party and of the International Editorial Board of the WSWS, pointed to the hypocrisy of Washington in depriving workers of their democratic right to strike, while citing “democracy” and “human rights” to wage war all over the world.

“One of the most difficult challenges which confront working people is to understand the nature of the society in which they live,” he explained. “Not to be guided by empty phrases but to understand the actual economic and social interests that rule society and how they find expression in the political system.” While stressing that workers should have no illusions in the power and ruthlessness of the state, he explained that working people have organized many times throughout history to defeat laws, such as the Fugitive Slave Act, erected to defend the interests of the ruling class.

The anti-strike law “breezed through” Congress “because what was at interest was of fundamental importance to the ruling elite.” He concluded: “Now, if you want to treat the law as though it were the word of God” and absolutely unchallengeable, “then of course, there’s nothing you can do. But if you understand that what’s being implemented is a class law, which has only been overcome [in the past] through mass struggle, then the world looks very very different.”

The meeting ended with dozens of attendees sending statements of support and asking how they could become involved in the RWRFC.

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