

Rail union bureaucracy allows opposition candidate to take office, while demanding sweeping attacks on freedom of speech

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On Friday afternoon, Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) President Dennis Pierce announced he would step down as president, paving the way for opposition candidate Eddie Hall to take office.

Hall, a local officer from Arizona, won the union's presidential election in a stunning upset that indicates the huge rank-and-file anger over the BLET's role in ramming through the White House-brokered contract. The union was able to secure a narrow ratification by the engineers, but the rejection of the deal by workers in four other unions prompted Congress to intervene to unilaterally impose it earlier this month.

Hall had an open complaint against him, filed by a member of Pierce's BLET United slate, that he had accepted "outside assistance" from a "nonmember employer" by sharing an article from the *World Socialist Web Site*. That article reported on the fact that 25 of the 26 national leadership positions, with the sole exception of the presidency where Hall was the one opposition candidate, were "elected by acclamation" at the BLET convention. On that basis, the WSWs characterized the vote as a "sham election" of the type conducted by dictatorships.

The response that the article prompted from union officials only confirmed this. The complaint against Hall for merely sharing the article was based on an absurd legal theory that, if accepted, would effectively ban criticism of the union leadership and prohibit any news publication from even reporting on union elections. A union disciplinary committee found Hall guilty and also recommended the union's legal counsel file a complaint against the WSWs with the Department of Labor, on the grounds that its coverage constituted election interference.

Even after the election, however, Hall could still have been disqualified as a candidate, because he had not complied with an order to remove the article from his social media pages and publish a letter disavowing it.

The revelations of the complaint and the possibility that Hall could be disqualified prompted an angry response from railroaders. "Pierce needs to admit defeat and move on!" one worker said. "We have spoken, and we want him gone!"

"The union leadership invoked 'democracy' when they agreed to put the substandard tentative agreement to the membership," another worker observed. "Yet the 99.5 percent vote to strike was ignored. ... Now the membership has spoken again by removing Mr. Pierce, but yet again leadership is ignoring the will of the membership by sanctioning Mr. Hall for 'collaborating with socialist agitators.' Rank-and-file workers are enraged. Mr. Pierce's removal is only the beginning."

Another worker described the thinking behind workers who supported Hall: "To me it seems the BLET leadership is corrupted by politicians, and there's a definite need for change. I have talked to several people who work at Union Pacific and BNSF, and they all responded with, 'Things can't get any worse with Eddie Hall as president.'

"The bottom line is, that when Pierce came out in September with the news that he had averted a strike [with the tentative agreement which included only three medical layoff periods per year] ... that completely showed everyone that he had been out of the craft too long and was out of touch with what everyday railroaders were dealing with in regards to attendance policies.

"It truly seems like the Union leadership ranks are similar to a Mafia, meaning 'kiss my feet and you move up and are part of the in-crowd.' This needs to be overhauled, and it feels like the politicians are at the top of his feet kissing."

Although the vote count was completed by Monday night, the BLET unexpectedly delayed the formal announcement of the results. There was no doubt intense internal discussion over how to proceed.

This week also saw a meeting of the General Executive Board of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, of which the BLET is a part. Teamsters general President Sean O'Brien, who called on workers to keep their criticism "at the dinner table" in a speech to the BLET convention, chaired the meeting. It was also attended by Labor Secretary Marty Walsh, who also spoke at the BLET convention and who played a central role in both brokering the contract and then crafting the congressional intervention to impose it. Pierce did not attend the meeting, according to sources.

The letter sent by Pierce on Friday laid out a complicated

maneuver, which he said was the product of “serious consideration.” Under this settlement, Hall will be allowed to take office, but the basic democratic issues raised in the complaint will be decided in favor of the apparatus.

There are two basic elements in this maneuver.

First, the complaint against Hall has not only been upheld, but the Election Protest Committee has invalidated the entire election and ordered it be re-done. New elections will be held, but Pierce will step aside and not be a candidate. Pierce will also withdraw all remaining complaints against Hall. (A total of 11 had been filed.)

This means that Hall will technically be elected unopposed in a manner similar to the other 25 national officers, because he will take office not because railroaders voted for him in the first election, but because no other candidate ran against him in the second one. This will also lead to Hall taking office with a black mark on his record, having been found guilty and punished for accepting “outside help” in his election campaign.

Second, Pierce, ends his letter by calling for a massive escalation of internet censorship, including the wholesale removal of social media pages where criticism of the union leadership takes place. Pierce writes:

I ask that those who manage social media pages that incite division against other members and officers shut those pages down too. If President-Elect Hall and the Advisory Board that he will preside over are to have any chance at success, the hateful rhetoric, division and infighting fostered by social media and egged on by outside non-member forces must end. The membership must stand united in the fight against the rail carriers, and stop blaming their union and its officers for the actions of those carriers.

I am certain that President-Elect Hall will agree with me how critical this is. Honeymoon periods for incoming union presidents are made shorter and shorter by these divisive forces. I intend to give the new administration a fighting chance, and ask each and every member to do the same by standing united. Place the blame for the oppressive workplace where it belongs, on the rail carriers—not your union.

This threat carries real weight. Pierce is not merely lending advice as an outgoing president to his successor but as the leader of the slate which controls 25 of the 26 national positions. He is giving Hall his marching orders.

This crackdown on social media may already have begun. David Manning, an administrator for the popular Rail Pail Facebook page, told the WSWS Friday night that he was asked by an intermediary to delete the page. The request was refused.

Pierce has previously requested the page be shut down

numerous times, according to Manning, and had been removed and banned from the group.

“They try to make us out to be a source of fake news,” Manning told the WSWS. “We are far from that. We post what they share and let people make comments. They don’t do that, and they hate that we do. There is no false news spread.”

Manning also was a candidate for BLET president, but he was not placed on the ballot because delegates at the convention refused to nominate him.

Pierce’s demand that workers “stop blaming their union ... for the actions of those carriers” is absurd. First of all, workers have the First Amendment right to think and say whatever they please.

Second, workers were legitimately furious over actions that the bureaucracy itself took. This includes ignoring votes by 99.5 percent in favor of strike action, leading the charge for Biden to appoint a Presidential Emergency Board which later sided with the companies and keeping workers on the job after the original September 16 strike deadline.

The BLET was able to secure a narrow ratification of its contract only through weeks of delays to dissipate workers’ momentum, which also served to strengthen Congress’s hand to intervene to block a strike. Anger over this deal and the means used to pass it is why Pierce lost the election.

This opposition also found expression in the growth of readership of the *World Socialist Web Site*, as well as the growth and influence of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Several statements by union officials denouncing both had no effect and in fact likely bolstered their credibility among rail workers.

The central lesson that the bureaucracy has drawn from the experience of the past year is the need to “control the narrative,” as one top AFL-CIO official told Politico recently. Opposition among the rank and file must be dealt with, and the ability of workers to speak, share information and organize themselves through avenues not controlled by the apparatus must be ended.

The settlement under which Hall is being allowed to take office is designed to ensure that his unexpected victory does not upset these plans.



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