

The lessons of the rail struggle of 2022

The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee
3 February 2023

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 or filling out the form at the bottom of this page.

Brothers and Sisters,

Last year, we passed through a major strategic experience for ourselves and the whole working class. We fought a battle against the carriers, the Biden administration and Congress, and the corrupt union bureaucracy.

The battle may be over, but the war continues. The intervention by Congress to impose the contract resolves nothing, as far as we are concerned. The carriers are now openly flaunting even this miserable sellout deal whenever it is convenient. Three of the Class I's have announced pilot programs for one-man crews, and BNSF has announced plans to contract out locomotive maintenance outside of the bargaining units. That would be a flagrant violation of any contract, and even by the standards of the RLA, clearly qualifies as a "major issue" worthy of strike action.

As far as management is concerned, the "contract" is only binding on us workers. They feel emboldened because they know they have not only Congress on their side, but the union apparatus. Last year, SMART-TD hailed the PEB recommendations on the grounds that it supposedly put an end to one-man crews. Now, it turns out they had been secretly negotiating these pilot programs for months. As for the IBEW, it has called a strike vote over the locomotives which it will simply ignore like the unions did last year. IAM District 19 President Kyle Loos has even proposed mandatory overtime as a supposed "solution."

Now is no time for passivity. As we said in our statement last December, the action by Congress was completely illegitimate and an attack on not only our democratic rights, but those of workers everywhere.

"Therefore," we concluded, "railroad workers reserve the right to organize and prepare collective action" in response. We, the rank-and-file railroad workers, must organize to prepare action which we deem appropriate in defense of our rights and our livelihoods.

To prepare ourselves for the fight which is already beginning, we must learn the lessons of the experience through which we have just passed. This is critical not only for ourselves but the whole working class. As we speak, in response to a series of national strikes by British railroaders, Parliament is threatening to impose US-style anti-strike laws. Here in the US, more than 1.5 million other workers have contracts which expire this year, including UPS workers, autoworkers and other major industries. They must learn from our example and prepare themselves accordingly.

What was revealed last year? There were four main lessons:

First, workers are fighting against a conspiracy involving management, the government and the union bureaucracy. Throughout, the union officials worked hand-in-glove with Biden, provided political cover for the PEB, bought Congress time through endless delays and sought to enforce contracts through dubious votes marred by fraud. They lied to us, told us repeatedly that we did not have the right to strike and that nothing could be done if Congress intervened. In the end, SMART-TD President Jeremy Ferguson even claimed that Biden's intervention against us was for "the good of the country!" In reality, it was for the good of the profit interests of American businesses.

This is not just a case of a few bad apples at the top. This is a system of labor control which they have worked out over decades. It is institutionalized partly through the RLA and similar laws but extends even beyond that. In the union bureaucracy, corporate America and Washington see a means of enforcing de-facto bans on strikes. Biden is attempting to build on

this in other critical industries, including on the docks where workers have been without a contract for more than 6 months.

Second, both political parties are parties of the rich. The internal civil war raging on Capitol Hill suddenly evaporated just long enough for these supposedly mortal enemies to come together against us. A key role was played by the so-called “lefts” in the Democratic Party, including Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. These so-called “anti-capitalists” either voted for the anti-strike law or worked to ensure its swift passage.

The political system in the United States is not a “democracy.” It is a system of class domination in which the interests of only a tiny, wealthy minority are the ones which are allowed to be expressed.

Third, the struggle showed the immense power of the working class. The carriers started out by claiming that we do “not contribute to profits.” But they were quickly forced to contradict themselves when the whole of corporate America became seized with holy terror at the prospect of a rail strike as “not thinkable.” In its own way, the intervention by Congress is an admission that it is us, the working class, not Wall Street hedge fund managers like Warren Buffett, etc, which not only produce all profits but make society run.

Fourth, workers can fight back against this conspiracy, to the extent that they organize themselves independently. The well-laid plans to ram through the contract were threatened and disrupted solely to the extent that rank-and-file workers organized actions themselves. The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee organized informational pickets, online meetings with hundreds of people and wrote and distributed statements which were widely read by railroad workers. Railroaders as a whole took to social media as forums relatively uncontrolled by bureaucratic censorship.

In the end, this made the ruling class’ victory extremely costly. Attempts to screen their enforcement of the deal through sham votes organized by the bureaucracy utterly failed, and Washington was forced to intervene openly and directly, exposing forever all pretensions about being “pro-labor.” This has only underscored to workers the fact that our fight is a rebellion against the entire existing set-up.

The organizer of this rebellion is the Railroad

Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which continues to fight. This is an entirely new type of organization, based on the principle that the will of the rank-and-file takes absolute priority, and controlled entirely by workers themselves, not by career bureaucrats.

The fight is not over. It is only just beginning. Therefore, we urge you to join the RWRFC. Help us build the new structures of workers power, to ensure that this will be the last time that a contract will be ever be imposed on us against our will!



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact