

Teamsters President Sean O'Brien was a frequent guest at the White House in advance of rail strike ban

Joshua Rodriguez, Tom Hall
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Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien, facing an angry and restive mood among 340,000 UPS workers, has pledged time and again in recent months that the union will strike the logistics giant if a new contract is not reached by July 31.

Workers, however, are widely suspicious, particularly after the current contract was imposed by the Teamsters bureaucracy in 2018 despite a majority of voters rejecting it. O'Brien, a notorious faction fighter for then-president James Hoffa Jr., was elected on the lowest turnout since the Teamsters moved to direct elections in the early 1990s, although groups like Teamsters for a Democratic Union have spent years trying to recast O'Brien as a break with the past.

White House visitor logs show that O'Brien is a regular caller to the Joe Biden White House. In particular, he made several visits that coincided with key points in last year's railroad struggle. Biden sought unsuccessfully to ratify a pro-company contract, before going to Congress in late November to secure a strike ban. Two of the three largest rail unions, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) and the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) are part of the Teamsters.

Throughout the struggle, the rail unions worked hand in glove with the Biden administration, falsely presenting it as an ally of railroaders. They sought to ram through a deal brokered by the White House, subjected workers to endless delays and bought Congress crucial time until after the midterm elections to enable them to ban strike action and impose the contract.

No details were ever released from either side about the content of O'Brien's White House meetings. But O'Brien himself has admitted that he met with Biden multiple times. At a rally last month in Los Angeles, O'Brien said: "I had a White House briefing this past week," He added, "And I had to talk to a bunch of different people in the White House about what the potential is if there's a strike." According to O'Brien, he went to the White House to boast about the impact of a UPS strike and to demand that Biden stay out of it. But in his speech, he then immediately tried to cover for the White House by claiming that it " isn't the truth" that the "administration interceded" against railroad workers.

O'Brien's absurd claim to have laid down the law to Biden does not hold water. In reality, these meetings could only have been

strategy sessions to discuss how to break the resistance of workers and to prevent a strike.

This is a serious warning to workers that, despite militant rhetoric designed to lull them to sleep, the union bureaucracy and Washington are cooking up a sequel to the railroads, this time at UPS.

Seven visits in 2022

White House visitor logs, which extend to January 30, 2023, showed O'Brien has visited the White House seven times during the Biden administration. All of these occurred in 2022, taking place on April 4, September 6, October 31, November 2, December 7, December 8 and December 12.

All but the April 4 meeting, which was held shortly after O'Brien himself took office as Teamsters general president, were held in the climax of the rail struggle, with several meetings corresponding with critical points:

- The September 6 meeting was held the day *before* Biden's National Mediation Board called the rail unions to Washington on September 7 for government-mediated talks. This was done in order to put together a contract before workers could legally begin a strike on September 16, when the provisions of the Railway Labor Act were exhausted. Those meetings resulted in a rotten deal which resolved none of workers' demands, including no paid sick leave and no relief for rail crews from the brutal 24/7 attendance policies such as Precision Scheduled Railroading. The decision to call these last-ditch talks to prevent a strike was almost certainly made after consultation with O'Brien personally.

According to remarks O'Brien gave to the BLET's convention last fall on the Las Vegas strip, he was also personally involved in the government-mediated talks themselves. However, this would not have shown up on the visitors' list because they were held in a federal office building rather than at the White House.

- The October 31 meeting was held on the first day of voting for engineers and conductors in the BLET and SMART-TD. The voting began only after continuous unexplained delays, particularly when it became clear that the contract was headed for

defeat. The BMWED, the third-largest rail union, voted down the contract in mid-October. However, the BMWED officials refused to call a strike, instead extending the “status quo” to “five days after Congress reconvened”, after the mid-term elections. The transparent purpose of this was to buy Congress time and political room for maneuvering to ban a strike.

- O’Brien met Biden again on November 2, six days before the midterms. On November 9, once it became clear that the election results were extremely close, the BMWED suddenly announced it would extend the “status quo” once again, this time to December 9. According to reports at the time, this was done at the request of Labor Secretary Marty Walsh.

- The December 8 and 12 meetings were held in the immediate aftermath of the vote in Congress to ban a strike. The rank-and-file anger over the union leadership’s role in preventing the strike also produced a crisis within the BLET bureaucracy, which was holding leadership elections at the same time as the contract vote. Workers chose to punish the BLET officialdom by voting out president Dennis Pierce in favor of Eddie Hall, the sole opposition candidate on the ballot. O’Brien’s meetings took place in the final days of the election campaign, when the tabulation of votes would have started.

White House visitor records end on January 30, so there are no records of further visits by O’Brien, including his visit last month, which he referenced in his Los Angeles speech. But there can be no doubt that he and the Teamsters apparatus are still in regular discussions with the White House, particularly in regards to UPS.

This includes not only direct White House visits but through phone calls, visits by White House officials to union conventions and Teamsters General Executive Board meetings and other, more informal channels. For example, both O’Brien and then-Labor Secretary Marty Walsh (who resigned in March to take over as head of the National Hockey League Players’ Association), as well as then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, addressed the BLET’s national convention in October.

The union bureaucracy versus the workers

But O’Brien is only one of countless top union officials who routinely make pilgrimages to the White House to strategize how to contain the rank and file. In February of 2022 for instance, United Steelworkers President Tom Conway met with Biden and other high-ranking White House officials, before announcing a contract to block an oil refinery strike. This was seen as vital for the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which produced a shock wave increase in global oil and gas prices.

In late 2021, Matthew Loeb, International President of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), and his entourage would almost certainly have had similar talks months before ramming through a sellout deal, which the membership then voted down. That contract was “ratified” in November 2021, despite an absolute majority voting against, because of IATSE’s electoral-college-type voting system. Loeb

was recorded as visiting the White House on December 12 of last year.

Last July, O’Brien and Loeb established a “Mutual Aid and Assistance Pact’ in order for both unions to “work together to achieve shared goals and initiatives,” according to a Teamsters press release.

O’Brien constantly reassures the membership that he intends to “correct” the rotten deal that was imposed on the membership back in 2018. But then he praises and forms an alliance with Loeb, who imposed a rotten contract on his membership in the very same fashion that prior Teamsters President James Hoffa did.

To add insult to injury, the Teamsters have instructed their own members working in the film and TV industry to cross the picket line of writers, who began a national strike on May 2. In fact, according to workers, Western Region director Lindsay Dougherty even instructed Teamsters members not to visit picket lines during their time off.

The bureaucracy of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, as with those of the other major US trade unions, is not only in bed with management. It functions as an extension of the capitalist state. The US government has not hesitated to intervene directly to prop up the authority and credibility of the apparatus, such as when it took over the Teamsters in the late 1980s. At the same time, Teamster officials enjoy privileged access to top officials in Congress and in the White House.

The government considers the Teamsters apparatus, which controls over 1 million members, a critical element in domestic political stability. Through the mechanism of the bureaucracy, the government hopes to achieve “labor peace” by blocking strikes and enforcing concessions-filled contracts.

What conclusions must workers draw from this? Above all, they cannot allow the control of their struggle to remain in the hands of bureaucrats who are on the rolodex of the White House. If there is to be a real struggle at UPS and other workplaces, it will have to be organized by workers themselves, against both the union apparatus and against the threat of government intervention.

This is precisely the initiative that railroaders took last year in response to the betrayals of the union bureaucrats, when they formed the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The Committee served as the strategic center of opposition to the deal and to the government’s intervention, and influenced railroaders through strategy statements, informational pickets and public meetings attended by hundreds of workers.

A rank-and-file committee must also be formed at UPS. The WSWWS stands ready to assist workers who want to take up the fight for rank-and-file control. For more information, fill out the form below.



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