

While trying to ram through more sellouts, US rail union official warns of “class warfare” in Labor Day message

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Railroad workers, tell us what you think about the new tentative agreement and what conditions are like at your yard or terminal. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

A top rail union official issued an official Labor Day message over the weekend, while he and other officials are trying to ram through a new round of sellout contracts on around 100,000 railroad workers. The official is Jeremy Ferguson, the head of SMART-TD, the second-largest rail union in the US.

Currently, workers on the largest Class I railroads are working under a contract they had rejected but which was imposed by Congress and Biden in late 2022. This exposed the character of the government as an instrument of class rule, as well as the role of the union bureaucracy, which worked with the government to block a strike.

The deal they are now seeking to impose is even worse than the one Congress imposed in dictatorial fashion. It contains only 17.5 percent in pay increases, spread out over five years.

The current deal does not expire until New Year’s Day, and the legally prescribed national bargaining process does not officially begin until November. But the railroads and the unions have announced at least 20 individual deals, broken up union by union and railroad by railroad, to circumvent this process. They are seeking to impose a national deal in all but name (the terms for all of these contracts are nearly identical) in order to prevent another rank-and-file rebellion by railroad workers, like that which occurred in 2022.

Under these conditions, Ferguson had the gall to urge workers to “learn about labor history.” He continued: “The collective power of union solidarity is as important to our lives today as it was to workers in the 1800s. The stands we make against management’s greed are the same fights that have gone on for hundreds of years.”

But Ferguson says nothing about the history of the past two years, including the betrayal in 2022. He does not even

say anything about the present, not even acknowledging the deals they are trying to push through.

“Child labor laws, minimum wages, the sanctity of healthcare being part of the compensation for our labor WERE NOT GIVEN TO US [emphasis in original],” Ferguson continues. “They were fought for because we in labor took a stand.”

What a fraud! Workers have had to take a stand against Ferguson and the union bureaucrats, who have given up all of the gains of the past.

In 2022, workers were determined to fight and voted by over 99 percent to strike. But Ferguson and company’s response was to denounce and threaten them. He even claimed at one point that the US Constitution prevents railroad workers from striking.

Fellow bureaucrat Tony Cardwell, head of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED), attacked the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee as a “fringe group” for demanding the will of the membership to strike be respected.

In other words, the viewpoint of the bureaucracy is that workers have no rights.

“Perspective is a powerful tool,” Ferguson continues. This is true, but the lessons of history only work to his disadvantage. His statement that railroaders are in the same fight “that have gone on for hundreds of years” is an implicit acknowledgment that the bureaucracy has helped the railroads turn back the clock by generations.

The history of the class struggle, including pivotal battles such as the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, the Pullman Strike of 1894 and others show that workers are in a fight not just against the railroad bosses but the pro-capitalist courts and governments. The historic struggles of the railroad workers have inevitably raised fundamental questions about the real nature of capitalist society and the question of political power. This is why railroaders have produced some of the most outstanding socialist revolutionaries, such as Eugene

Debs.

These historical questions were at the heart of the 2022 struggle, as well as with the continuing class struggle around the world. In the months after the strike ban, the White House worked with other union officials to ram through sellouts in the auto industry, UPS, the West Coast docks and others. Canadian railroad workers are currently fighting against binding arbitration by the federal government which robs them of the right to vote on their contract.

In Europe, railroaders in Germany, the UK, France and other countries have been carrying out a series of national strikes. In every one of these, workers have confronted not just management but national governments and a united capitalist class determined to ramp up exploitation.

But these are precisely the forces with which Ferguson and the union bureaucrats are allied. “The past four years have been among the most productive in the history of this country’s labor movement,” he claims. “Gains made by rail labor and also in the quality of life for working-class Americans across the country will be seen as key points in this era in American labor history.”

Who is he trying to kid? To the extent that this is not a complete invention of his own mind, Ferguson is referring to “gains” made by the bureaucracy, not workers, especially under the past four years of the Biden administration. The White House has developed the ties which already existed between the bureaucrats and the government to unprecedented heights.

He is building a corporatist alliance to smother the working class and prepare the “home front” for war. This was the meaning of Biden’s declaration over the summer that the AFL-CIO was his “domestic NATO.” No doubt, one of the principal goals of the new deals now being rammed through is to clear the deck for new wars being prepared for the months after the November election, no matter who wins.

The supposed gains of the past four years have been “facilitated by people in power who value our viewpoint,” Ferguson claims, who are opposed to “CEOs and managers who dictate from on high, draw the largest paychecks and blatantly ignore the fact that labor contributes to their profits.”

In reality, the bureaucracy shares the government’s hostility and fear of the working class. They recognized that “labor contributes to profits” by banning a national strike which would have disrupted this. Only months later, after both parties joined against the railroaders, the government shielded Norfolk Southern from responsibility after it poisoned the town of East Palestine, Ohio.

At any rate, the bureaucrats can barely muster the energy to keep up their pretense of being opposed to railroad CEOs.

Cardwell and others have heaped praise on CSX chief executive Joe Hinrichs for his “responsible corporate governance.” Norfolk Southern is one of the railroads that already has deals worked out with many of the major rail unions, adding insult to injury.

Ferguson then closes by turning his attention to the November election, where he presents Trump as the sole danger threatening workers’ supposed “gains.” He writes: “Do we want to face a resurgence of class warfare that threatens to erase historic gains and protections the labor movement has earned? Or do we want to see our progress be preserved and continue?”

In fact, class warfare is the policy of both parties, and this was proven in the 2022 strike ban. But this is not even simply a “policy” but the basic reality of capitalism, which is based on the exploitation of the labor of the working class. Ferguson and the bureaucrats, however, strive to make sure that class warfare occurs only in one direction, against the workers.

His fearful reference to “class warfare” exposes the conservative, reactionary outlook of a union bureaucrat. The class struggle *of the working class* is the basic progressive force in modern society. The logic of the struggle of the working class against exploitation leads it into a struggle against poverty, inequality, war and every other social ill, culminating in it taking power in a workers’ government running society in the interests of human need not profit.

The bureaucracy is terrified of this and aims not for workers’ power but a regulated framework under capitalism to impose order and discipline from above. It strives to come under the wing of the capitalist government, to demonstrate the bureaucracy’s loyalty and secure its own positions and privileges through the common suppression of the class struggle by the rank and file.

The real lessons which workers must draw during the Labor Day weekend is how to prepare for the next stage in their fight against the government-management-union alliance. This requires the further development of the rank-and-file rebellion which began two years ago under the leadership of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee.



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