SMART-TD announces concessions contract with Norfolk Southern, responsible for East Palestine, Ohio disaster

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Railroad workers: Take up the fight against the sellout contracts and for rank-and-file control! Join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee by filling out the form below.

The International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers—Transportation Division (SMART-TD) reached a tentative agreement last week with the freight railroad company Norfolk Southern (NS). SMART-TD is the largest rail union, and Norfolk Southern is the first carrier with which it has reached a tentative agreement.

The deal is the latest in a series of contracts which have been quietly announced over the past few weeks. At least 20 separate agreements have been reached between nine separate unions and three carriers—Norfolk Southern, CSX and BNSF. These are being announced through a highly unusual procedure, bypassing national talks which have not yet begun and typically drag on for years.

This is an attempt to bypass the opposition of workers, who rebelled against a sellout deal brokered by the White House in 2022. A critical role was played by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, organized to prepare a showdown not just with the railroads but with the union bureaucrats and the pro-corporate parties.

In 2022, workers in the rail unions voted overwhelmingly in favor of a strike. SMART-TD and the other unions insisted that their members abide by the antiworker Railway Labor Act (RLA), which establishes a painfully drawn-out series of negotiations. When the unions and companies reached an impasse, President Joe Biden named a Presidential Emergency Board to draft a pro-company agreement that workers roundly rejected.

Once the process outlined in the RLA was exhausted in September, rail workers were legally allowed to strike. But rather than calling a strike, the top brass of the unions bought time for Congress and Biden to illegalize a strike and impose the deal.

Today, both the rail companies and the unions seek to avoid the eruption of workers' outrage that would result from a repeat of the 2022 struggle. In his Labor Day message, SMART-TD President Jeremy Ferguson, who absurdly told workers in 2022 that the United States Constitution made it illegal for them to strike, warned against "class warfare" because he opposes workers' struggle against the companies.

By breaking up national talks into dozens of separate, bilateral deals, the union bureaucrats hope to shatter the unity of railroad workers and isolate each segment from the others. But the contracts are all nearly identical, amounting to a national deal in all but name. They contain wage increases even worse than those imposed by the government in 2022, 17.5 percent over four years compared to 24 percent.

The fact that SMART-TD's first full agreement is with Norfolk Southern (it previously announced a deal covering only train service workers at CSX) adds insult to injury. Norfolk Southern was responsible for the preventable derailment of a train carrying toxic chemicals in East Palestine, Ohio, in February 2023. The resulting explosion and the unnecessary controlled burn of railcars released hydrogen chloride and phosgene into the air, water and soil.

The community still has not recovered from the public health, environmental and economic damage caused by the company's single-minded focus on cost-

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cutting and profit-boosting.

"This is unacceptable to me," an anonymous engineer told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "In this agreement, vacation time is less than I already get now with the carrier."

The new tentative agreements "were not done in good faith," said another engineer. "The unions across our nation gave away an opportunity."

One rail worker who wished to remain anonymous told the WSWS, "It does seem a little bit off. The carriers seem eager to get it done quickly. It isn't like the railroads to do right by the workers—or the unions to be all ready to present offers without even putting up a fight and trying to get a little more than just pay raises. It doesn't feel like they are on our side. Conspiring sounds like the perfect word to describe what is happening."

There can be no doubt that the Biden-Harris administration is a principal force behind the push for the unusually early contracts, as it has been involved in every major union contract over the last four years. The railroads and the unions also began announcing the deals at around the same time that the White House intervened in the recent Canadian railroad strike, urging the Canadian government to impose binding arbitration.

One possible motivation as to the timing is that Washington wants to get the contract over with now, before the November election, so that another rebellion does not disrupt well advanced plans for after the election, regardless of who wins. The railroads are critical choke points in US and global supply chains, not just in the civilian economy but for the military as well.

A number of key contracts with similar "national security" implications are also coming up at the same time. This includes the contract at Boeing, one of the largest contractors for the US military, and for East Coast dockworkers.

What is certain, however, is that railroaders face not only a workplace struggle but also a political struggle. Just as in 2022, they are coming into simultaneous conflict with the rail carriers, the union bureaucrats and the federal government. The rotten tentative agreements that the unions and companies are attempting to oppose must be rejected decisively.

Workers must begin expanding the work of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee as the alternative leadership to the treacherous union bureaucracies. Building upon the lessons of 2022, workers must create new structures giving them the ability to override decisions by union officials which violate their will, enabling them to link up with workers in other key industries and prepare for the best possible conditions with which to meet government intervention.

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