SMART-TD union announces deal at BNSF, paving way for 1-person train crews

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Take up the fight against the new sellout contract! Join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee by filling out the form below.

On Sunday, September 22, at 2:00 p.m. Pacific Time/5:00 p.m. Eastern Time, the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee is holding an online meeting to mobilize the broadest support in the working class for the 33,000 striking Boeing machinists. Register for the event by clicking here.

The Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers Transportation Division (SMART-TD) announced a tentative agreement with Class I rail carrier BNSF (Burlington Northern Santa Fe) which officially sanctions one-person crews for the first time ever. This agreement, part of an effort to impose new contracts piecemeal across the entire industry, is a gift to Warren Buffett and BNSF's other wealthy shareholders which will destroy thousands of jobs.

Less than two years after the rail unions helped the White House and Congress block a national strike, they are now helping management carry out a historic assault on jobs, while bypassing formal national bargaining structures in order to isolate workers into dozens of different contracts. Nearly two dozen separate deals have been announced between the 12 major rail unions and the six Class I carriers. But this is a national contract in all but name, as all have virtually identical language.

These deals are being rammed through under cover of darkness, with three unions already announcing the "ratification" of contracts at CSX (Chessie & Seaboard), following votes which many workers were unaware of or never received ballots for.

The situation is urgent. As they did in 2022, railroad workers must organize themselves independently to defeat this massive betrayal. This means the development of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which played the major role in fighting the sellout two years ago.

In the BNSF-SMART-TD contract, core language includes the same wage and benefit figures as other contracts that have been proposed at other unions, including the contracts recently forced through at TCU (Transportation Communications Union) and BRC (Brotherhood Railway Carmen). This includes a pathetic 17.5 percent wage increase over four years, even less than the 24 percent imposed two years ago by Congress. There are also slight adjustments to vacation time accrual.

More significant is a Memorandum of Agreement with BNSF to adjust the Crew Consist agreements that have stood for decades. Crew Consists set standards for the composition of train crews. Through much of the 20th century crews consisted of five positions: engineer, conductor, brakeman, fireman and trainman. Over recent decades, though, rail carriers have reduced the number of positions required on trains to just the conductor and engineer.

Conductors are represented by SMART-TD. Seeking even greater cuts to costs, major rail carriers have been pushing for one-man crews with just an engineer on board.

This memorandum would sign over authority to the company to "eliminate any second train service position (i.e., brakeman, helper)" and abolish "All right of refusal provisions pertaining to crew size." This alone will destroy thousands of jobs as entire positions are eliminated.

But the assault on jobs continues with the effective elimination of the conductor role. The memorandum outlines the creation of a Road Utility Conductor under the umbrella Road Utility Position (RUP) category. Road Utility Positions will work off of the train and in the train yards, which they will drive between in a company vehicle on public roads. While not an explicitly stated move to one-person crews, the language is clear in the effect it will have.

RUPs will have a "broad array of responsibilities and opportunities" and may be required to "perform any combination of ground services duties." RUPs will also be required to assist train and yard crews with tasks "otherwise performed by a ground service crew member" and "may be required to assist multiple trains and/or yard jobs in each of their tours of duty."

While the agreement does not explicitly abolish the conductor role, it is clearly setting up the transition to one-

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person crews and the dissolution of conductor positions into utility roles following the destruction of brakeman and helper positions. BNSF and SMART are hoping that promises of more regular schedules and time off will sway workers into voting for their own demise.

Workers' seniority will also be effectively erased under the agreement, sending workers with decades of experience to the bottom of the seniority ladder.

Additionally, the agreement contains a $27,000 bonus, in a thinly veiled attempt to purchase support for a jobs bloodbath.

The agreement is similar to a separate agreement establishing a pilot program at Union Pacific (UP), announced in December 2022 only days after Congress passed the strike ban.

Workers on Reddit noted that UP had moved swiftly to eliminate as many jobs as possible. One worker commented: "this is identical to the UP agreement. [You] best believe the carrier WILL cut every single brakeman/switchman position it possibly can. UP did, all locals lost the brakeman, and most yard jobs aside from the main lead jobs did as well. One man RCL [Remote Control Locomotive] jobs and all....

"We have no ready work board, they're just firing as many people as they can to reduce workforce. BNSF is likely to follow the same path."

At the time, SMART claimed that the Crew Consist agreement protected in-cabin conductor roles. Yet the agreement with BNSF says nothing about maintaining two-person crews and instead sets the stage not only for one-person train crews but the destruction of thousands of jobs and the eventual dissolution of the conductor role.

The contract is a sellout through and through, from the substandard wage increases to the blatant destruction of jobs. That the union leadership would even bring such an agreement before the membership is a demonstration of how far the bureaucracy has become integrated with management.

The deal has also been announced as SMART has formally endorsed the re-election of fascist Republican Senator Josh Hawley. The bureaucracy justified endorsing Hawley, who plays a leading role in developing the party's right-wing populist appeal to industrial workers and was instrumental in the appearance of Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien at the Republican National Convention, over his declared support for federal legislation mandating two-person crews.

But this has been exposed by SMART's own abandonment of two-person crews. In reality, its endorsement of Hawley expresses the bureaucracy's deep hatred and fear of the workers it claims to represent.

It is not a coincidence that these contracts are being put forward now before the national elections in November and the expiration of the current contract at the end of December. The SMART-TD bureaucrats and carrier management understand that they must move quickly to push through sellout contracts and prevent a struggle between the bosses and the rank and file.

The Crew Consist agreement has provoked outrage among workers, who understand that the contract will destroy jobs and open the way for one-person crews. This anger must be channeled into the strongest possible "No" vote against the contract, demonstrating that workers will not sell their jobs away.

But voting no is not enough. The TCU and BRC announced the passage of their contracts without any vote totals, while workers continue to raise that many never received a ballot to vote. Workers cannot expect the union bureaucracy to honor a rejection of this sellout and must be prepared for the union apparatus to pull every trick in the book, including vote fraud, to push the contract through.

To oppose this effort, workers must put the rank and file in control of this fight. Workers must build rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled organizations of the working class that can mobilize opposition to the sellout contracts and organize a fight to win workers' demands across all companies, unions and crafts.

In particular, these committees must send delegates to the strike by 33,000 Boeing workers and build a unified fight against the corporate assault on jobs, wages and working conditions. They must also link up with the more than 9,000 Canadian rail workers, who were blocked from taking strike action by the Canadian government at the urging of the White House.

Only by building an independent movement of the international working class can workers seize control of their struggles and break free from the pro-corporate collusion of the rail companies and unions.

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