

Biden White House “urges” rail carriers to provide sick leave

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On September 25, two US cabinet members signed a joint letter asking three of the six Class I carriers to provide paid sick leave for all of their workers.

The letter, penned by Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and acting Labor Secretary Julie Su and sent to CSX, Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Kansas City, is an exercise in hypocrisy and damage control. The same administration begging railroads to provide sick leave banned a strike through Congress two years ago and imposed a contract, which workers had already rejected, without sick leave.

A key role was played by the bureaucrats of the rail unions, who delayed strike action until after the midterm elections to give Congress the chance to pass a no-strike law. Now, the bureaucrats are attempting to pass even worse contracts than the one imposed two years ago. The new contracts contain smaller wage increases and worst of all, paves the way for one-man train crews.

The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, formed during the struggle two years ago, has issued a statement calling on workers to “demand a national contract with real gains which will set an example for workers everywhere.”

After the strike ban, the railroad industry began throwing a handful of sick days to workers as a sop which allowed both the Democrats and the union bureaucrats to cover for their own anti-worker records. Today, roughly 90 percent of the workforce receives some form of inadequate sick leave. The letter calls on the railroads to provide paid sick leave to the remaining 10 percent in various crafts on the three carriers.

Buttigieg and Su are trying to provide continuing cover for the Democrats and the union bureaucracy. But even on its face, the sight of top officials from the most powerful government on Earth sending a groveling letter to corporate CEOs underscores the complete subordination of US politics to Wall Street.

“We write urging you to provide your employees what so many of us take for granted: paid sick leave,” the letter begins. “Taking off sick without penalty or loss of pay is also not a novel or extraordinary benefit. In fact, as of 2023, 80% of all workers in the U.S. economy have access to paid sick leave.”

Put another way, this means that a staggering 20 percent of the US workforce, or around 32 million people, do *not* have paid sick leave. The United States is one of only two developed countries (the other being South Korea) which does not legally require companies to provide paid sick leave.

Buttigieg and Su explicitly *reject* government action to mandate paid sick leave on the railroads. “The best deal is one the parties reach on their own,” they write. But why? It is only “best” from the standpoint of corporate executives, not workers.

The Democrats, which decades ago jettisoned any real program of social reform, sometimes use phrases about sick leave, health care and other elements of the social crisis they have helped to create to bolster their own election campaigns. But when in power, they have shown to be just as ruthless in defending corporate profits as Republicans. While urging the railroads now, as if they had no say over it, to grant sick pay, they before quickly joined hands with Republicans in Congress to ban a strike two years ago.

Railroaders do not work under “voluntary” agreement, but under government compulsion. Nearly a century ago, Congress passed a law, the Railway Labor

Act, which all but rips up workers' right to strike by imposing endless rounds of mandatory talks, "cooling off" periods and other obstacles (a strike could still legally have taken place in late 2022 because all of these provisions had finally been exhausted).

The result has been that, while conditions for the working class have been moving backwards for many years, conditions on the railroads are some of the worst in any industry. Rail crews often are forced to work for weeks at a time, as long as 16 hours a day.

While groveling on their knees in public for an agreement on sick days, Buttigieg and Su are moving ruthlessly behind the scenes to suppress strikes. Buttigieg intervened on behalf of Biden to pressure the Canadian government to shut down a rail strike over the summer this year and impose binding arbitration.

Both were key in shutting down a three-day strike on the East Coast docks last week, and Su's role was crucial in helping ram through a deal on the West Coast docks last year, after workers began rebelling against having been kept on the job for a year without a contract.

In their letter, Buttigieg and Su hail the provision of a few sick days as a "significant improvement" which shows "what can be achieved in a short timeframe when labor and management come together to do what is right for workers." In reality, it showed how the union bureaucracy and the railroads are "coming together" against rank-and-file workers.

When CSX first announced it would give a pathetic four days of sick leave to some of its workers last year, the bureaucracy went out of its way to hail CEO Joe Hinrichs for his "responsible corporate governance." This contrasted sharply with their vicious response to rank-and-file railroaders demanding a national strike in 2022, whom they denounced as a "radical fringe" and threatened with victimization.

What is given, is easily taken away. In August, Union Pacific reneged on a new attendance policy allowing 4 days off every 15 days, citing "labor shortages" which it created by driving workers out through intolerable working conditions.

For workers to win "what is right" requires, not collaboration with management, but a struggle against it and the whole corporate-controlled political system.

By contrast, the reference to "coming together" expresses the corporatist labor policy of the Biden

administration, screening attacks on workers through a "collective bargaining process" with union bureaucrats tied to management and the government. The experience two years ago proved that, when workers threatened to break through this framework, they have not hesitated to use openly hostile methods against workers.

This policy continues today. The rail unions are now trying to avoid another rank-and-file rebellion by bypassing the national framework entirely and divide workers up until dozens of separate, albeit almost identical contracts. There can be no doubt this strategy was hashed out with close involvement from the government.

In its recent statement, the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee declared:

This time, we are better prepared because of the experience two years ago. Organizing on the principle that we workers have the right to prepare any and all actions deemed necessary to protect and improve our conditions, we must take control out of the hands of the bureaucrats and the pro-corporate parties.

This is the strategy that must guide railroaders today.



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