

BNSF workers reject contract which would have paved the way for one-man crews

Bill Mertz**5 November 2024**

Railroad workers: Tell us how you're voting on the latest contracts, and why, by filling out the form below! All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Train and engine service workers at the railroad BNSF have rejected a tentative agreement between management and the SMART-TD union. The contract was a massive sellout which would have set the table to eliminate conductors from locomotives and replace them with a “ground based” position.

This is the third major rail contract to have been rejected in recent weeks, following the defeat of another SMART-TD deal with Norfolk Southern and the rejection by maintenance of way workers of a contract at CSX.

An official document with the BNSF results was originally posted on Reddit on November 1st. However, undoubtedly under pressure from the union bureaucracy, the image was deleted by the original poster. As with the rejected Norfolk Southern deal, SMART-TD has made no mention of the results on their website.

But the BNSF results showed that 58.77 percent of workers rejected the wages, rules and healthcare tentative portion of the agreement. As with dozens of similar contracts being pushed through across the industry, the deal contained a meager 17.5% wage increase over 5 years. It also would have implemented a two-tier health plan which the companies have been pushing for years, and some minor vacation improvements that cost the carriers essentially nothing.

Significantly, 69.86% of workers voted to reject the crew consist modification agreement, that also included a \$27,500 buyout of trainmen (brakemen and yardmen), eliminated the third crew member on some assignments, as well as allowing the establishment of a “road utility position” (RUP).

The RUP is a ground based conductor that would be assigned within a certain area, provided with a company vehicle, and would theoretically travel from train to train as needed to provide assistance to broken down trains, or facilitate switching operations. The companies have long wanted to establish this job-cutting measure under the guise of providing conductors with “a better quality of life,” but workers see through this farce.

Eliminating the second crew member on a locomotive removes a second set of eyes that assist the engineer, which can be decisive in avoiding accidents. Train crews already notoriously work long and irregular hours without sufficient rest time, and trains often operate through desolate areas where assistance, whether operational or emergency, is hours away. But these factors count for nothing compared to the railroad companies’ ever-insatiable thirst for more profits.

BNSF had previously negotiated a deal with SMART-TD to begin engineer-only operations on routes with operational positive train control in 2014. Workers, however, rejected the deal.

Jeremy Ferguson, president of SMART-TD, in defense of the current rejected crew consist scheme, states “...these agreements (if ratified) will secure another five years where no changes can even be proposed under Section 6 of the Railway Labor Act... Ratifying these agreements now will protect and guarantee the future of our conductors, while providing another five years for us to focus on passing a rail safety bill through Congress, which would make two-person crews the literal law of the land.”

The claim that this buys space for Congress to pass a safety bill is absurd. Congress did the exact opposite by imposing a strike ban two years ago after workers rejected a sellout deal. SMART-TD and the other

unions played a decisive role in buying time until after the midterms to give Congress the space to rip up workers' right to strike.

The fight for single person crews is not going away anytime soon; railroad companies backed by their Wall Street puppet masters demand it. The Association of American Railroads, a railroad industry mouthpiece, maintains a page and "fact" sheet on their website stating, "Efforts to require at least two-person crews in the freight rail industry lack a safety justification and ignore the successful use of single-person crews in the US and globally."

Undoubtedly the residents of Lac Megantic, Quebec would disagree with this statement. In July of 2013 an oil train with 72 cars and five locomotives operated by a single crew member broke free from its handbrakes, rolled down a grade and derailed in the town. The highly flammable crude on board exploded and incinerated the town, killing over 50 residents.

The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) enacted a minimum two-person rule in 2024, but it was filled with loopholes easily exploited by the railroads.

The union bureaucracy is working with both the carriers and the two corporate parties to enforce "labor peace" in industries critical to US supply chains. The Biden administration, which calls the AFL-CIO its "domestic NATO," has made clear it sees this as key to preparing the country for war.

Boeing workers waged a courageous seven-week strike, causing the company to hemorrhage cash and ground production to a halt at America's largest exporter and a major defense contractor. But the Biden administration intervened with the International Association of Machinists to push through a deal that satisfied none of the workers' demands, especially the reinstatement of a defined benefit pension plan.

Dockworkers waged a three-day strike in October, but despite militant-sounding rhetoric from the International Longshoremen's Association were ordered back to work with no protection from automation.

The new contracts on the railroads are a continuation of the bureaucracy's role two years ago. By announcing dozens of separate, bilateral contracts between the 12 unions and 6 Class I carriers, they are attempting to peel off as many workers as possible from the national bargaining framework which is only

now beginning, in order to disrupt workers' unity.

The working class is facing a tripartite alliance consisting of the government, the corporations, and the union bureaucracies. Workers operate the mechanism of society, and it is through labor that all profits are created. It is through these profits the capitalist class funds their lavish lifestyles, initiates wars to defend their interests, and through massive accumulation of wealth and power further exploits the working class.

By rejecting the deal at BNSF workers have sent an important message, but rejecting contracts is only the first step. The experience of the past, especially the last two years, proves that the union bureaucrats will not come back with something better but only respond even more ruthlessly.

The union apparatus cannot be pressured; it must be smashed and replaced with organs of workers' power. The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which played the leading role in campaigning against the contracts two years ago, is fighting to build such structures to enable workers to fight against the carriers, the bureaucracy and the two Wall Street parties.



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