

SMART union decries “misinformation” while helping management prepare for one-man crews at BNSF

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The International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers-Transportation Division (SMART-TD) released a statement May 19 titled “Truth and Lies about the BNSF Crew Consist Agreement.” The statement, itself dripping with hypocrisy and lies, denounces a “flood of misinformation making the rounds”, particularly from “outside our union”, about the proposed crew consist agreement.

By “outsiders,” SMART-TD means above all the *World Socialist Web Site*. It is clearly concerned about its influence among railroaders, tens of thousands of whom have read the WSWS. It is also terrified of the influence of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The RWRFC spearheaded efforts to fight the last sellout contract in 2022 which was imposed on workers by Congress, after the union bureaucrats used threats, lies and endless delays to block a national strike.

To avoid a repeat of the 2022 rebellion which nearly escaped their control, the union bureaucrats split workers up in the new contract talks by negotiating as many contracts as possible with each company individually, rather than through the national bargaining framework. The goal is to isolate workers in any craft or at any carrier who take a stand against the new pattern agreement, which is even worse than the one Congress imposed three years ago.

At BNSF, where rail crews work under the brutal 24/7 “Hi Viz” attendance policy, union officials are trying to ram through a crew consist agreement which would be the first step towards eliminating the conductor position and reducing train crews to a single engineer. The contract, exposed earlier by the WSWS, has generated mass anger among railroaders. The first version of the contract was overwhelmingly rejected last fall.

In response to its reporting, SMART-TD slandered the WSWS as “bad faith actors” and outsiders while failing to refute a single thing reported by the WSWS.

Now they are doubling down. The new statement posted to the union’s website directs workers to two videos produced by SMART 1000 Local Chairman Matt Lenz, in which he showers

the agreement in praise.

SMART is clearly aware of how much railroaders despise their union leadership. “I, like many of you, used to be very angry at a lot of the union,” Lenz starts by saying. “Now that I have this position [local chairman] I have learned quite a bit of stuff... Now [that] I have a better understanding of what was going on, I’m less angry.”

In other words, Lenz became another bureaucrat in bed with management. He is demanding that workers be more appreciative of how hard the bureaucrats work to betray them.

Lenz tries to present the contract as a “beautiful thing” for SMART members. But even in the course of praising the deal he himself admits that it is the first step towards the destruction of thousands of jobs. Invoking the unstoppable tide of technological progress, he predicts that freight trains will not only run with one crew member, but become completely autonomous in the near future.

Lenz tries to spin this by claiming that the new Road Utility Position (RUP), a ground-based role designed to eventually replace conductors, is a great win for SMART members. RUPs, he says, will “do the work not protected by other crafts.” With the elimination of brakemen and helper positions, and the eventual disintegration of other rail crafts, the RUP is essentially a conversion of the conductor position into a catch-all role that will absorb duties across road, yard and vehicle-based tasks and dismantle two-person crews by taking the conductor out of the train.

Lenz predicts that this could become “the last position on the railroad” after the rail companies eliminate as many rail jobs as possible. SMART members will receive seniority in picking up the pieces left behind in this jobs bloodbath, even getting seniority “above every engineer that was set up ... for the positions that could be the last spot on the road.”

Lenz is blandly predicting tens of thousands of layoffs are the inevitable consequence of automation. Conductors should be happy with the RUP role because, after all, some jobs are better than none.

In speaking in these terms, Lenz and the SMART-TD bureaucrats use the language of management, not workers’

leaders. Instead of a common struggle against all six Class I carriers in defense of jobs, they propose a civil war with the other crafts over who gets to hold on to the last remaining positions.

Expressing its corrupt ties with management, SMART-TD's apocalyptic predictions accept as given that new automation technology will be left in the hands of the private equity firms which control the industry.

But this is not the only outcome. If the railroads were placed under public ownership and run democratically by workers themselves, then the technology could be used to end slave-labor overwork and shorten the workweek with no loss of pay, fund substantial improvements to health and retirement benefits, free up labor and resources to conduct maintenance long neglected by management and massively upgrade the country's aging and unsafe rail system.

That the opposite is taking place—the new technologies are being used to ramp up exploitation to the nth degree and cut costs to the bone, endangering both railroaders and the public and making inevitable more disasters like the poisoning of East Palestine, Ohio—is due solely to the control of the technology by the corporate oligarchy. The alternative requires a struggle for workers' power to end the dictatorship of Wall Street and run society to meet human need. The bureaucracy, which funds its six-figure salaries from workers' dues and is joined at the hip with management and the government, is unceasingly hostile to such a perspective.

Giving in to management and the arbitration board is a key element of Lenz's comments. He refers uncritically to a statement from the arbitration board last fall where it agreed with the carrier that, "There is some appeal to the idea that employees should be 'sent a message' that they cannot blithely reject the good faith efforts of their experienced and diligent representatives. Rejection of contracts has become all too common in this age of social media, and that is corrosive to labor relations."

Here the board complains that workers can use the internet to bypass the regime of censorship by the bureaucracy and organize resistance to sellouts.

The implication is that it would be better if workers did not have the right to vote on the contract at all. And in fact, that is what the bureaucracy strives towards by loyally imposing the Railway Labor Act, which undemocratically limits workers' right to strike and enforces years of mandatory arbitration.

Under conditions where Trump violates the Constitution and every law at will, this premise not only becomes more and more absurd, it means attempting to impose a literal dictatorship on workers. According to them, workers must simply allow the government to rip up all of their democratic and social rights.

Lenz claims that the bureaucracy can do nothing but work with management under the National Mediation Board—which consists 2 to 1 of Trump appointees—because they are required

to "come up with something that basically makes it so we don't have to strike and the company doesn't have to lock us out. Because let's be fair, if the railroad shuts down our economy tanks."

No other statement could express the complete and utter bankruptcy of the union bureaucracy. Faced with historic attacks on rail safety and jobs, the union leadership responds with claims that workers can do nothing that would affect the general health of the "economy," by which they mean profits.

In reality, a national rail strike would, as it did in 1877 and other times in the past, inspire workers across the country and even the world to launch their own walkouts, culminating in a general strike counterposing the interests of workers with those of billionaires like BNSF owner Warren Buffett.

Such a mass movement would not only raise the demand for a massive redistribution of wealth back down to the workers who create it, but it would also develop into a political struggle against the two corporate parties and the emerging Trump dictatorship.

This is the bureaucracy's worst nightmare because they see disruption to the capitalist economy from a strike—and worst of all, a political struggle against capitalism—as a threat to their own social interests and oppose any action that could undermine them.

But workers are seeing through the lies. These videos and the increasingly hysterical denunciation of outsiders—by which they mean all those who insist the rank-and-file and not the bureaucracy should exercise control—reek of desperation.

It is high time that railroad workers take measures to enforce their democratic will, countermand the betrayals of the union officials and return power from the union offices to the workers where it belongs.

The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee must be built in every area and link up with committees in other industries, including auto, logistics and others, to begin preparing a broader movement of the class in defense of its interests.



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