

US train engineers union tries to whip up anti-Mexican hatred

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Last month, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) published a statement on its website scapegoating Mexican railroaders for job losses in the United States.

The statement, whose headline blares, “Your help is needed to protect the U.S. southern border and to save American rail jobs,” seizes upon adjustments to crew changes by Union Pacific and Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC) at border crossings to create the impression that a flood of Mexican workers is crossing the border to take “American” jobs.

“Mexican train crews are taking trains a few miles inside the border—now,” it says. “How far will they be allowed to go in the future?”

Lining up with President Trump’s anti-immigrant witch hunt and militarization of the US-Mexico border, the union bureaucrats call CPKC’s measures a “dangerous practice” that threatens “border security and the economic security of our members.” The statement links to a form letter, urging readers to endorse it and contact their members of Congress.

Anti-Mexican chauvinism

The BLET’s presentation of the railroad’s changes is a gross distortion of reality. Union Pacific is altering the procedure for changing out Mexico-based for America-based crews on trains entering the United States at a rail crossing in the border city of Eagle Pass, Texas. This exchange currently takes place on the bridge crossing the Rio Grande. Union Pacific is moving the point of the exchange seven miles inside the US, at its nearest yard, in order to save time.

Similar procedures are already used at other border crossings across the United States, including on the US-Canada border, according to reports.

Not a single job in the United States would be affected by the change. But even to the extent that the railroads, like other multinational corporations, undoubtedly do whipsaw workers in Mexico and the United States against each other, they are able to do so only to the extent that the union bureaucrats on both sides of the border enforce arbitrary national divisions.

In promoting toxic “America First” nationalism, the union bureaucracy is attempting to divert attention from its own role in helping impose job losses. On May 18, the day after the statement was published on its website, the BLET shut down a powerful strike by

New Jersey Transit commuter rail workers after reaching a tentative agreement which does not meet workers’ demands.

The BLET also announced a tentative agreement at CSX only days before issuing this statement, with even worse wage proposals than the contract imposed on workers by Biden and Congress in 2022. CSX is in the midst of plans for a major restructuring, having already eliminated dozens of crew positions earlier this year. No doubt management plans to kick this into the next gear the moment the pen hits the paper on the new contract.

Also in a recent statement, the SMART-TD conductors union tried to browbeat members into accepting a sellout at BNSF, telling them that one-man crews and even fully automated trains are inevitable and that their only solution was to fight over what few jobs will be left.

Global strategy needed

What is required is international unity of American, Mexican and Canadian railroaders in a common struggle against the continent’s six Class I carriers.

The union bureaucracy in the United States has spent decades whipping up hatred against Mexican, Canadian, Japanese, Chinese and other workers from across the world. But not only has this never saved a single job, the union bureaucrats have signed off on the destruction of millions of jobs in the US and the reversal of a century of progress in working conditions in the name of making American corporations globally competitive.

The railroads have been key to the growth of world trade and globalization. While the capitalists have used this to their advantage to slash jobs, it has also made possible a far more powerful, globally unified movement by the working class. Such a movement can only be built through a fight against the nationalism of the bureaucrats and the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Few industries so vividly express the international unity of the working class as the railroads. The US rail system was built in the 19th century largely through immigrant labor, especially Chinese and Mexican workers, who faced horrible discrimination, including by chauvinist union officials.

Today, the US railroads are part of a trans-continental network. Conditions have converged significantly. Canadian Pacific merged with Kansas City Southern in 2023, putting thousands of American and Canadian railroaders under one roof. Last year, 9,300 Canadian

railroaders at CPKC and Canadian National carried out national strike action until the government ordered them back to work. The BLET, which also has members under a separate contract in Canada, did nothing even to inform American workers about the strike.

In Mexico, the railroads were nationalized in the 1930s. In the 1990s the government sold off the network to private buyers (including Kansas City Southern, predecessor of CPKC), who then fired thousands and reduced crew sizes from six to three (now two). Today, according to Mexican government statistics, there are only 16,240 railroaders left in the country, compared to around 100,000 a few decades ago.

Workers in Mexico are eager to link up with their brothers and sisters north of the border. In 2019, tens of thousands of factory workers in the border city of Matamoros launched a wildcat strike, in which they marched to the US border to appeal for international solidarity, chanting “gringos, wake up!” Later that year, GM autoworkers in Silao, Mexico were fired for refusing to scab on the GM strike in the United States.

Bureaucrats back Trump

There are reasons that workers should oppose the change in the border procedures, but for the exact opposite reasons put forward by the BLET. The change at Eagle Pass was apparently requested by the US Customs and Border Protection service, according to UP management, evidently in order to prepare more extensive customs procedures as part of the Trump administration’s drive to militarize the US border. CPKC has also gifted CBP a new advanced vehicle inspection system for use at the crossing in Laredo, Texas.

Trump’s incitement against immigrants is a key part of his plan to build a dictatorship. Trump is abducting immigrants regardless of status, especially those like Mahmoud Khalil who have expressed political opposition to Trump’s policies. He is ignoring the 14th Amendment, which guarantees citizenship to all those born in the US, and defying court orders.

Falsey scapegoating immigrant workers for the loss of jobs caused by US corporations, the attack on immigrants is a test case for police state measures which will be deployed against everyone.

The BLET is only one of many unions whose officials are lining up behind Trump. This includes: the United Auto Workers, whose president Shawn Fain gives speeches claiming a war economy will replace lost autoworker jobs; the International Longshoremen’s Association, which worked with Trump to impose a new contract at the start of the year and calls him the “best friend” of American workers, while they tell dockworkers to work harder to avoid losing their jobs to automation; and the Teamsters, of which BLET is a part, whose General President Sean O’Brien spoke at the Republican National Convention and which is responsible for tens of thousands of lost UPS jobs.

This expresses not only their personal corruption and narrow nationalist outlook, but the function of the bureaucracy as creatures of the capitalist state. Demonstrating their loyalty to the would-be Fuhrer, they are trying to carve out new niches for themselves as adjuncts of his border police and other instruments of state repression.

This is building upon their existing relations. In 2022, the rail unions worked to impose a contract brokered by the Biden White House to

block a national strike against slave-labor conditions. But a rank-and-file rebellion against the deal, in which the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee came to play a central role, staggered the bureaucracy, which nearly lost control. With workers pushing for a national strike, union officials delayed for weeks until Congress preemptively banned it.

Officials from the major rail unions are now working to ram through the next round of sellouts. It is evident that their primary goal is to isolate both the train crews, under conditions where the carriers are pushing to cut thousands of jobs through the switch to one-man crews, and the workforce at Union Pacific, the only carrier where none of the major unions have signed an agreement, and where management is apparently pushing for major changes on work rules.

Significantly, the BLET’s anti-Mexican open letter complains that the change to border crew changes would undermine the Railway Labor Act, which, they claim, “exists to protect the rights of railroad workers to unionize, bargain collectively with their employers, and ensure labor stability across the national rail network.”

The opposite is the case, as railroaders know. The RLA severely and undemocratically restricts workers’ right to strike. It was passed in the 1920s in the years following the Russian Revolution, to ensure that national strikes like those in 1877 and 1894 would never take place again.

But the bureaucrats support the RLA because it secures their institutional interests while giving them a weapon against the rank and file.

The conditions exist for a powerful movement which threatens to totally upend the nationally-based labor-management-government collaboration upon which the bureaucrats rely. That is what the BLET is really responding to in its statement.

This movement requires new organizations, to overthrow, not reform, the corrupt bureaucrats, and carry out a global strategy, which the union officials oppose. This means building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees through railroad committees across North America, to coordinate trans-continental action. They must also rally to their side railroad workers across the world, including in Germany and Britain, where a series of national strikes have recently taken place.

The founding principle of this movement is the need for a frontal assault against the “right” of employers to a profit, which the bureaucrats defend. The working class must prepare for a fight against social inequality, the corporate oligarchy and the capitalist system itself.



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