

Why are the rail unions silent on Trump's talk with Union Pacific's CEO on where to deploy troops?

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Nearly a month has passed since Union Pacific CEO Jim Vena advised Donald Trump on which American cities should be targeted for National Guard deployment. Yet the rail unions have maintained complete silence.

The meeting, formally convened to discuss the proposed merger of Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern (UP-NS), revealed the naked alliance between the corporate elite and the Trump administration. If approved, the merger (since endorsed by the SMART-TD union, whose members include conductors) would create the first transcontinental railroad under a single ownership, accelerating monopolization and attacks on jobs, conditions and safety.

But in the course of the meeting, the discussion turned to Trump's strategy to establish a dictatorship. The would-be dictator asked Vena which American cities he should send troops into next. According to Trump, Vena named Memphis, St. Louis and Chicago.

Vena was identifying critical chokepoints in the rail system as targets for military repression. These are all key rail hubs where Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern lines converge. Chicago alone has seven major terminals and 12 more in the surrounding area. Significantly, since this meeting troops have been deployed to Chicago and are expected to be sent to Memphis in the next few days.

Like his White House dinners with tech billionaires, such as Microsoft's Satya Nadella, this meeting showed Trump is acting as a political instrument of the financial oligarchy. Faced with mounting opposition to inequality, the ruling class is turning ever more directly to brute force. In Chicago, ICE agents are already conducting militarized raids against immigrants. With the arrival of the National Guard, rail workers will be among the next targets.

Since then, Trump's plans have advanced considerably.

On Wednesday, NBC carried a report that the White House is deep in discussions about invoking the Insurrection Act, a wartime measure for conditions of civil war. But while Lincoln used the Act in the furtherance of the war to abolish slavery, Trump aims to use it as the equivalent of Hitler's Enabling Act of 1933, giving a pseudo-legal pretext for ruling with unlimited powers.

The situation is urgent. Not a single established political institution, including above all the Democratic Party, has proven capable or even willing to stop Trump. Unless stopped by the working class, Trump's campaign to set up a fascist dictatorship in America will succeed.

This is only possible through a rebellion against the union apparatus. Not a single rail union, including SMART-TD and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET), has warned its members about this open collusion between Trump and the railroads. They are burying the danger under a veil of silence.

Rail workers have a long and bitter experience with state repression. The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and the Pullman Strike of 1894 were both crushed by federal troops.

This was combined with legal repression. Eugene Debs, the leader of the Pullman Strike who later became a leading socialist, spoke in the early 20th century of the capitalist class ruling through "government by injunction." Decades of repression culminated with the Railway Labor Act (RLA) of 1926, in which the state created a permanent legal mechanism to suppress strikes through endless mandatory "mediation." It amounts to a permanent injunction against railroaders.

Across the US, and in fact the world, the trade union bureaucracy long ago threw in its lot with management.

Not a single union in America is alerting its members to the danger of dictatorship, and many, including the Teamsters (of which the engineers' and maintenance of way workers' unions are part) are openly siding with Trump.

But the RLA became the means through which the rail union officialdom was integrated with management and the government to an extraordinarily close degree. They openly defend the RLA, falsely claiming that its provisions are to protect workers' rights without the need for a strike.

They have appealed to successive administrations to demand they appoint mediation boards, effectively demanding strike injunctions against their own members. The most infamous of these was in 2022, when they worked hand in glove with Congress and President Biden to block a national rail strike. When workers rejected a White House-sponsored deal, the unions played for time to give Congress the space it needed to impose the deal. A major role in the fight against this sellout was played by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

The union bureaucrats see themselves as an industrial police force. In 2022, SMART-TD President Jeremy Ferguson argued that the US Constitution effectively barred workers from striking. This was a lie which not even management was prepared to make. In a Labor Day message in 2024, Ferguson warned against the "resurgence of class warfare." While denouncing opposition as the work of "outside agitators," the union bureaucrats treat railroad CEOs in the friendliest terms.

Their betrayals are continuous. The BLET recently ratified a contract with Union Pacific granting only a 17.5 percent raise over five years, even less than the 24 percent imposed by Congress in 2022. Barely half of the membership bothered to vote, a measure of workers' contempt for the bureaucracy. The Brotherhood of Railway Signalmen (BRS) rail workers meanwhile rejected their deal last month. Significantly, the BLET did not even mention the UP-NS merger in its public statements on the contract.

Not only has SMART-TD not said anything about Vena's meeting with Trump, it has announced a deal swapping support for the merger for dubious job protections. In the statement announcing the deal, SMART-TD hailed Vena for "thinking outside of the box."

Meanwhile, the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) publicly defended former CSX CEO Joe Hinrichs, because he conceded a handful of sick

days to a minority of workers. "Our union has committed to being truthful and transparent with BMWED members, and that means giving credit where it is due," said the union, which threatened any workers in 2022 who might defy its refusal to call a strike.

The groveling statement came only a few weeks after union President Tony Cardwell's Labor Day statement, where, quoting from the Gospel to invoke divine wrath against corporate America, he spouted hot air about greedy executives throwing "pizza parties" and other "empty gestures."

The unions' silence over Vena's meeting with Trump takes their role as industrial policemen role to a new level. They are proving their loyalty not only to the corporations but to the capitalist state and the dictatorship Trump is building. Like all dictatorships, it must crush workers' rights in order to survive—and the unions are determined to help.

The low turnout in the BLET ratification and the rejection by BRS members show mass opposition bubbling below the surface. Rail workers want better pay, humane schedules and safe railroads. This struggle cannot be waged through unions that collaborate with the companies and conceal plans for military repression.

It is vital that this underground opposition find viable forms of expression, which will never come through the existing apparatus. Rank-and-file committees must be built to combine the fight against Trump with a rebellion against the union bureaucracy.

Rejecting toxic "America First" nationalism, they must appeal for unity with workers all over the world. The vehicle for such a fighting unity has already been founded with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

These committees must take up a political fight against the capitalist system itself, which subordinates everything to profit and is now preparing dictatorship. The alternative is workers' power and socialism.



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