

Railroad workers at CPKC reject nine-year contract by 2-to-1 margin across 11 states

George Gallanis
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Locomotive engineers and train-service workers at Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC) have voted down tentative agreements backed by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) and the SMART-TD union bureaucracy, marking a major rebuke to the railroad, the carriers and the union apparatus.

BLET announced on May 21 that its members had rejected the tentative agreement covering engineers by an overwhelming margin. With turnout of 71 percent, more than 65 percent voted against ratification. The BLET agreement covered roughly 1,200 engineers.

In a parallel vote, members of SMART-TD, which represents conductors and other train-service workers, also rejected the companion agreement. Turnout was 91.5 percent, with 58 percent voting no. Together, the two agreements covered about 1,700 train-and-engine employees across 11 states—Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas and Tennessee.

CPKC is the product of the 2023 merger of Canadian Pacific and Kansas City Southern. It is the first single-line transnational rail network in North America, spanning roughly 20,000 miles across Canada, the United States and Mexico.

The tentative agreements were announced April 24. They would have consolidated 11 existing contracts covering former Kansas City Southern Railway, Mid-South Rail Corporation, Tex-Mex Railway, CPKC consolidated territory and Dakota, Minnesota & Eastern locations into two long-term hourly agreements running from 2025 to 2034. This sweeping restructuring was presented by management and the union officials as a modernization of pay and work rules. In reality, it was an attempt to impose a new framework for labor discipline across CPKC's US operations.

SMART-TD officials touted a 32.5 percent general wage increase over the life of the agreement, spread out

over nearly a decade, along with scheduled rest, held-away pay after 16 hours, meal allowances, changes to personal leave, overtime after 10 hours and a seven-day mark system. But 32.5 percent over nine years amounts to barely more than 3 percent a year compounded—before inflation, and before accounting for the sweeping work-rule changes bound up with the shift to hourly pay.

Another central objection was the shift to an hourly pay structure. Railroad engineers have historically been paid on a mileage-based system.

The attempt to sell this as a major gain could only have provoked anger. Workers immediately understood that the “raise” was being used as a cover for a wholesale restructuring of pay and working conditions in the interests of the carrier.

The rejection is the latest in a series of rank-and-file revolts against concessionary contracts across the railroads—a sign that the long-sleeping giant of the working class, in the United States and around the world, has not only awakened but is now on the move.

In October 2024, Norfolk Southern conductors initially voted down their deal by 81 percent. The following month, BNSF workers rejected a contract that would have paved the way for one-man crews. Maintenance of way workers at CSX rejected their contract and were forced to vote a second time under threats from union officials. CSX engineers only narrowly ratified their deal with 53.6 percent.

Those contracts were rammed through only after workers were forced to vote again on virtually identical deals. The bureaucracy was determined to prevent a repeat of 2022, when railroaders staggered them by voting down a deal backed by the Biden White House and pushed for a national strike. The near-revolt by the rank and file was only settled for the moment by an act of Congress, signed by Biden, to block a strike and impose a contract.

The union bureaucracy's strategy in the subsequent round of national negotiations was to break up workers by craft, by carrier and by territory into dozens of separate agreements, in order to prevent the kind of unified national fight that nearly broke out in 2022.

The CPKC rejection is a sharp blow to that strategy. The fact that both engineers and train-service workers rejected parallel agreements is especially significant. It shows the objective basis for a common struggle across crafts, precisely what the carriers and the union officials are seeking to prevent.

But the 2022 struggle remains the essential reference point, and one that needs to be studied and discussed. Tens of thousands of railroaders were prepared to strike in defiance of the union apparatus and the White House. Such a strike could have paralyzed the country and drawn mass support from workers in every industry.

The leading role in organizing widespread opposition was played by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which was founded in the course of that fight to organize independently of the union bureaucracy and build a movement controlled by workers themselves.

The conditions that produced the near-national strike of 2022 have not gone away. They have only worsened. Precision Scheduled Railroading remains in place as the dominant operating model, with relentless cost-cutting, skeleton crews, longer trains, unpredictable schedules, constant on-call status and attacks on rest and family life.

The railroads continue to shower shareholders with money while squeezing the workers who move the freight. CSX alone recently announced a new \$5 billion stock buyback authorization. Meanwhile, derailments remain a constant feature of railroad operations. Class I railroads continue to report hundreds of derailments every year—while disasters such as the 2023 toxic chemical wreck in East Palestine, Ohio show the catastrophic consequences of cost-cutting and deregulation.

The Trump administration is accelerating the assault. The Federal Railroad Administration is now headed by David Fink, a former president of Pan Am Railways. The industry is pushing to repeal the federal two-person crew rule, expand automated track inspection and eliminate jobs. At the same time, the Surface Transportation Board and other federal agencies are being aligned ever more directly with the demands of the rail carriers.

This deregulation agenda has bipartisan support. The Democrats imposed the 2022 contract and banned a strike. Both parties, whatever their tactical differences, serve the same financial oligarchy whose thirst for profit knows no

end.

The CPKC vote is a powerful rebuke to the union apparatus. Its hostility to the workers was shown by the very fact that it brought back agreements running through 2034 and centered on a new hourly wage structure. But workers must press the initiative and place no confidence in the claim that the bureaucracy will now come back with something fundamentally better.

Its aim will be to wear down the CPKC engineers, conductors and other train-service workers—through delays, misinformation and ultimately a second vote on substantially the same deal, perhaps with minor cosmetic changes or threats that the alternative will be worse. This is exactly what has been done in other contract fights.

The lesson of the past three years is that the union apparatus cannot be reformed or pressured into a genuine fight. It is an instrument of class collaboration, structurally integrated into the corporate and state machinery that enforces these contracts.

Workers need their own organizations. Rank-and-file committees, controlled by the membership, must be built with the power to coordinate across crafts, carriers and borders. The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, founded in 2022 on precisely this basis, must be built in every CPKC yard.

The fight of CPKC engineers and train-service workers must be linked with conductors, maintenance of way workers, signal workers, mechanical workers and all other crafts—and with the broader working class facing the same corporate assault.



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