Wheeling & Lake Erie railroad workers carry out nine-hour strike against crew reductions

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Some 140 locomotive engineers and conductors at the Wheeling & Lake Erie Railway (W&LE) struck for nine hours on November 11 against management attempts to operate trains using non-union labor.

Management used supervisors to operate trains on Sunday, November 8, despite having qualified, rested union workers available. The action violated contractual protections and was part of the railroad's longstanding efforts to eliminate conductors and introduce single-person train operations.

The workers, members of the Teamsters-affiliated Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET), walked off the job at noon, establishing picket lines at railroad facilities across Ohio and Pennsylvania. By approximately 9 p.m., management had agreed in writing to stop assigning supervisors to perform the work of union engineers and conductors, abide by existing contractual protections, compensate workers who had lost assignments to managers, and refrain from disciplining those who participated in the strike.

But the settlement does not end the company's longstanding drive to eliminate conductors and reduce crew sizes. Workers struck over the same issue in September of 2013. In one documented instance, a railroad manager operated a train for 23 miles without a union conductor, despite four rested union employees being available for work.

After the 2013 strike, the railroad obtained a temporary injunction against the union, although the court conditioned its order on management agreeing not to use supervisors in place of engineers or conductors.

In April of 2015, a federal appeals court ruled in favor of the BLET, determining that the railroad's actions constituted a "major dispute" under the Railway Labor Act because the company was attempting to impose changes to established working conditions.

The latest agreement largely reaffirms obligations management was already required to observe. There is little reason to believe the company will abandon its efforts to reduce labor costs and eliminate crew positions.

Wheeling & Lake Erie is one of the largest Class II regional freight railroads in the United States, with headquarters in Brewster, Ohio. Together with the affiliated Akron Barberton Cluster Railway, its network encompasses more than 1,000 miles of track across Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Maryland.

The railroad serves approximately 250 customers, transporting steel, scrap metal, limestone, chemicals, grain, petroleum products and natural gas liquids. According to its parent company's financial disclosures, just two customers accounted for 43 percent of Wheeling's 2025 revenue.

Wheeling & Lake Erie connects with major Class I railroads, including Norfolk Southern, CSX and Canadian National, allowing freight to move throughout the North American rail network. It also serves three Ohio River shipping terminals, including one near Monessen, Pennsylvania, where freight is transferred between railroad cars, barges and trucks. Its combined operations handle more than 124,000 carloads annually.

The railroad's origins date to the nineteenth century, when the original Wheeling & Lake Erie carried coal and other commodities from southeastern Ohio to industrial markets and Lake Erie ports. It became part of the Nickel Plate system in 1949, Norfolk & Western in 1964 and subsequently Norfolk Southern in 1982.

The modern Wheeling & Lake Erie Railway was established in 1990, when an investor group purchased former Norfolk Southern lines, including portions of the original Wheeling & Lake Erie, Akron, Canton & Youngstown and Pittsburgh & West Virginia railroads. It subsequently operated for decades under a management-led ownership structure.

In 2025, the railroad was acquired for $1.05 billion by FTAI Infrastructure, a publicly traded infrastructure investment company managed by an affiliate of Fortress Investment Group, a global alternative-investment firm. The acquisition closed in August, with full control following regulatory approval in December.

FTAI also owns Transtar, which operates the Union Railroad serving Pittsburgh's industrial region. The acquisition raises the prospect that the new owners will ramp up the railroad's longstanding drive to reduce labor costs and crew sizes to increase investment returns.

For decades, the major US freight railroads, working through successive agreements with the unions, have reduced train

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crews from five or more workers to the two-person standard of an engineer and conductor. The companies are now seeking to eliminate the conductor and introduce single-person train operations.

The railroads contend that technologies such as Positive Train Control, remote communications and ground-based support personnel allow trains to operate safely with fewer workers.

Conductors perform essential safety duties, including inspecting equipment, handling switching operations and responding to mechanical failures and emergencies. On increasingly long freight trains, these duties can require walking considerable distances along the tracks. Eliminating the second trained crew member would leave an engineer alone to respond to emergencies.

The catastrophic February 3, 2023, Norfolk Southern derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, exposed the consequences of subordinating railroad safety to corporate operating priorities. The nearly 1.8-mile-long, 149-car train, which had three crew members, derailed after a wheel bearing overheated and failed. A trackside detector had recorded the overheating bearing 19 miles earlier, but Norfolk Southern's procedures did not require the crew to be warned.

The derailment released toxic chemicals, forcing thousands to evacuate. Residents continue to report serious health problems, and as the World Socialist Web Site reported in September, a resident-compiled list identified 84 cancer diagnoses, including 15 brain cancers, among people in the affected community.

The disaster underscores the need to use technology to strengthen safety and assist railroad workers, rather than as a means to eliminate jobs and increase profits.

In April 2024, the Federal Railroad Administration adopted a regulation generally requiring freight trains to operate with at least two crew members, subject to specified exceptions. The major railroad companies challenged the regulation in federal court, but in August 2026 the US Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit upheld the rule. The railroads subsequently petitioned for a rehearing.

The dispute has also continued on individual railroads. In September 2026, BLET reported that federal regulators had found Union Pacific in violation of the two-person crew rule following incidents in Nevada and Texas. In both cases, managers directed locomotive engineers to operate without their assigned conductors.

The two largest operating-craft unions, BLET and the Transportation Division of the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART-TD), have publicly opposed eliminating two-person crews and supported federal legislation and regulations requiring minimum staffing.

At the same time, the railroad union leaderships have played an active role in implementing crew reductions. In 2024, SMART-TD reached crew-consist agreements with Union Pacific and BNSF permitting the elimination of certain additional brakeman, switchman and yard-helper positions while retaining conductors.

BNSF workers rejected the agreement. Rather than organizing a struggle against the proposed staffing reductions, the SMART-TD bureaucracy and BNSF management submitted the dispute to binding arbitration. The resulting arbitration award imposed substantially the same staffing reductions that workers had voted to reject, eliminating positions on assignments that previously required additional workers.

The major railroad union leaderships have worked to enforce the restrictions of the Railway Labor Act, directing workers toward appeals to the courts and the Democratic Party rather than mobilizing their collective industrial strength.

This was demonstrated during the 2022 national railroad contract struggle. After BLET members voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike, and SMART-TD conductors and members of three other unions rejected proposed national agreements, the Biden administration intervened to prevent a nationwide walkout.

At Biden's request, Congress passed bipartisan legislation imposing the terms of the agreements, including those workers had rejected, which the president signed on December 2, 2022. While union officials publicly criticized the intervention, they accepted the imposed settlement rather than organizing an industrial challenge to it. The episode demonstrated the consequences of subordinating workers' struggles to the Democratic Party and the Railway Labor Act, rather than mobilizing the collective strength of railroad workers themselves.

The strike by 140 engineers and conductors at Wheeling & Lake Erie is a small demonstration of the enormous industrial power of railroad workers, a power the national union leaderships have refused to mobilize against the major Class I carriers.

To take up a fight for a national mobilization, railroad workers must build the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, established in the 2022 struggle to fight for a national strike and for democratic control controlled by workers. Rather than relying on politicians, courts and union officials, workers must organize their own collective strength, uniting engineers, conductors, maintenance workers and other railroad employees across companies and union jurisdictions.

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