

What's at stake in the struggle by US rail and oil workers

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Over the last several weeks, railroad and oil refinery workers in the United States have come to the forefront of a growing movement in the working class against exhausting and dangerous work schedules and the explosive rise in the cost of living.

Last month, 17,000 engineers and conductors at BNSF railroad—formerly Burlington Northern Santa Fe—voted to authorize strike action to stop the largest railroad in the US from imposing a new punitive attendance policy. The “Hi Viz” policy allots each worker 30 points and deducts points for every time that a worker takes off from work, regardless of the reason. To earn points back, workers must be on call 24 hours per day for at least two weeks straight. The policy is being used to discipline or fire workers who lose their points and to ensure that workers are available for duty virtually around the clock.

On January 25, a federal judge in Texas issued an injunction to block the strike, declaring the slave-labor attendance policy a “minor” issue over which workers are not allowed to strike under the Railway Labor Act of 1926, whose purpose was to all but eliminate strikes in the rail industry. In his ruling, US District Court Judge Mark Pittman declared that a strike would be unacceptable because it would lead to disruptions of the country's supply chains, prioritizing the profits of BNSF and corporate America over workers' democratic and even contractual rights.

With the strikebreaking injunction in hand, the company unilaterally imposed the attendance policy on February 1. Given that railroad workers had unpredictable schedules beforehand, the new policy will force workers to cancel doctors' appointments, spend less time with their families and function on less sleep. An inevitable consequence of the policy will be an increase in workers' fatigue, which will in turn increase the risk of serious accidents and deaths. This was underscored by the death of a BNSF worker who was struck by a train in Denver, Colorado, on

February 9, the day after the judge extended his injunction.

The Sheet Metal Air Rail Transportation-Transportation Division (SMART-TD) union and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) have opposed any serious mobilization against the Hi-Viz policy. Instead, the unions are enforcing the injunction and have instructed workers not to make any public comments opposing the attendance policy.

The battle at BNSF takes place as contract talks have reached an impasse for 115,000 railroad workers after two years without a new national agreement. Along with BNSF, CSX, Kansas City Southern, Norfolk Southern, Union Pacific and CN have slashed tens of thousands of jobs even as the amount of freight the railroads move has increased by 30 percent over the last two decades.

The national labor agreement covering 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers at 12 major energy companies expired on February 1. With crude oil hitting \$90 a barrel and prices at the gas pump reaching a seven-year high, Marathon, Shell, BP and other corporations are making massive profits. But Marathon, which is leading the negotiations, has issued a “final settlement” offer that includes 2–3 percent annual raises, which would result in a de facto cut in real wages, given the 7.5 percent annual inflation rate. The company made \$9.7 billion in 2021 profits and announced a \$5 billion stock buyback program for its wealthiest investors.

A worker at Marathon's Galveston Bay Refinery in Texas City, Texas, the site of a 2005 explosion at the then BP-owned facility, which killed 13 workers and injured 180 others, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that refinery workers routinely work 16-hour shifts for as many as 13 days in a row. “Marathon got \$2 billion in CARES Act COVID-relief money, and they promptly laid off 10 percent of the workers and doubled the pay of the CEO,” the worker said.

Oil workers are determined to win substantial improvements in wages and working conditions, but the United Steelworkers union has blocked a strike and forced workers to remain on the job under 24-hour “rolling” contract extensions. This has given the oil companies time to hire staff in preparation for a potential strike.

Over the next several months other key sections of workers face contract expirations. These include:

- 22,000 dockworkers in Washington, Oregon and California whose contract expires on July 1.
- 118,000 hospital workers fighting for increased staffing and better wages, including 7,000 nurses at Kaleida Health in Buffalo, New York, and 5,000 nurses at the University of Michigan Medical Center whose contracts expire on May 31 and June 30 respectively.
- 268,000 educators, including 120,000 teachers and school staff in New York City, 34,000 in Los Angeles and 3,000 in Oakland whose contracts expire between June and September.

Workers are being driven into struggle by the soaring cost of living. The energy price index rose 27 percent on an annualized basis, while food prices rose 7 percent. Meat, poultry and egg prices rose 12.2 percent, piped natural gas rose 23.9 percent and electricity, 10.7 percent. Gasoline was up 40 percent. Supply chain disruptions led to a 12.2 percent increase in new car prices and a huge 40.5 percent increase in the price of used cars.

Even as energy and logistics corporations reap massive profits amid soaring prices for oil and transportation, they are determined to resist demands for wage increases to keep up with inflation. At the same time, the government and corporations have ended all measures to stop the spread of COVID-19, even as more than 900,000 Americans have died.

The signal is clear: Workers are going to be forced to work till they drop, whether from illness or exhaustion, for the enrichment of major corporations and wealthy stockholders.

The pro-corporate trade unions, which had functioned so long to all but eliminate strikes from American life, are widely discredited and despised. One of the most significant features of this growing movement has been the increasingly open conflict between the trade unions on the one hand, which have responded by betraying workers’ struggles ever more openly and shamelessly, and the workers, who are more and more rebelling against these outlived organizations. The most conscious expression of this rebellion has been the formation of independent rank-and-file committees by workers around

the United States and the world.

President Biden is seeking to systematically promote the unions to shore up these decaying institutions. Through the expansion of the unions, Biden hopes to place workers under a form of state guardianship. This was made most explicitly in last week’s report by Biden’s Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment, which argued that as a “purchaser of goods and services,” the federal government “has an interest in its contractors reaching first collective bargaining agreements to promote stability and minimize disruption of services and goods procured by the federal government.”

The enforcement of labor “discipline” is also intimately bound up with the advanced preparations for military conflict by American imperialism against its main rivals, Russia and China. War on this scale is unthinkable without placing the entire society on a war footing and the suppression of dissent. Thus, last fall, Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg declared that a conflict with China “provides us with an opportunity to come together across the political divide.” He concluded, “At least half the battle is at home.”

This points to the need for workers to adopt a new strategy to guide their struggles, based on intransigent opposition not only to the trade unions but the capitalist state. Workers must continue to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, based on the complete independence of workers from the corrupt unions and both big business parties.

But the growing together of the unions with the state also points to the need for a political struggle by the working class against the capitalist system itself, which is driving the world towards disaster and is incapable of resolving any of the problems confronting modern global society. In opposition to the strategy of dictatorship and war by American and world capitalism, the working class must build an international movement based on the struggle for socialism.



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