

Five rail unions announce sellout deal with CSX, in bid to avoid repeat of 2022 rank-and-file rebellion

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Railroad workers: Fill out the form below to tell us what you think about this contract! All submissions will be kept anonymous.

On August 21st, the US railroad CSX announced a tentative agreement with three unions representing approximately one-quarter of its unionized employees. The deals are with the the Transportation Communication Union (TCU), the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen (BRC), and train service employees in SMART-TD.

Two days later, CSX declared a further two unions, SMART-MD, representing mechanical workers, and the American Train Dispatchers Association (ATDA), have moved to accept the tentative agreement. Deals with the remaining rail unions will likely follow, making this a pattern agreement for the other five Class I railroads in the United States.

These agreements arrive four months before the expiration of the current agreement on December 31st. According to CSX and the union officials, details will be released shortly to the membership for ratification.

The deal is the first since President Biden and Congress intervened in late 2022 to ban a strike and unilaterally impose a government-mediated deal which workers had already rejected. This was a major experience in the class struggle, which pitted railroad workers not just against management intent on imposing ruthless working conditions, but against the capitalist state and the trade union bureaucracy, which worked with the government to prevent a strike.

The Biden administration, which calls Biden the “most labor-friendly president in US history,” intervened to continue slave-like conditions in the industry. Railroaders, many of whom are on call 24/7

and can work 80 hours a week or more, were not even guaranteed any sick leave under the deal. In reality, it showed that the White House is relying on the trade union bureaucracy to suppress strikes and impose substandard deals. This was confirmed throughout 2023, with more sellouts on the West Coast docks, at UPS and in the auto industry.

TCU released some aspects of the agreement, which already make clear it is another massive sellout. It contains a 17.5 percent wage increase over five years, an average of 3.5 percent per year. They also claim unspecified “improvements” in vacation and health and welfare benefits and changes to work rules. It also maintains a 15 percent cap on monthly employee health benefit contributions.

In a statement praising this pathetic deal, TCU claimed, “This is the largest wage increase received on CSX in any round of bargaining outside of a Presidential Emergency Board in over 20 years.” But put another way, this means that workers received *better* contracts through endless rounds of government-mandated talks aimed at blocking strike action. It is not uncommon for talks to reach PEB mediation on the railroads, which are governed by the anti-worker Railway Labor Act.

SMART-TD also published a press release with scant details of the agreement, stating “...as other discussions on national bargaining items quickly broke down, we were pleased to find that CSX CEO Joe Hinrichs and his team at CSX were willing to step up to the plate and not play games.”

This statement underscores the cozy relations between the bureaucracy and management. Hinrichs oversaw the company during the last contract struggle,

when his friends in Washington rammed through a deal without sick days. A few months later, when CSX voluntarily granted a pathetic four days of sick leave, the union bureaucrats which had blocked a strike praised CSX for its “responsible corporate governance.” The bureaucrats supported this cynical maneuver because it helped them deal with simmering resentment from railroaders and promoted dead-end illusions in begging the railroads to act “responsibly.”

At the time, particularly fawning praise for CSX came from BMWED president Tony Cardwell, who had reacted furiously to rank-and-file calls for strike action in 2022. In a recent statement on August 16, Cardwell told workers that “[t]o date, the BMWED bargaining team has been actively engaging with any willing and serious Class 1 freight railroads ahead of the November moratorium.” The moratorium is in reference to the serving of Section 6 notices, staking out the bargaining positions of the unions and railroads under the anti-worker Railway Labor Act.

The timing of the deal is unusual in comparison to past negotiations, where agreements are generally made years after the previous one expires. There can be little doubt that the motivation for getting these deals through early is to preempt another drawn-out contract fight which triggers a full-on rank-and-file rebellion, this time totally escaping the bureaucracy’s control.

CSX CEO Hinrichs made this clear when he declared: “CSX and *our labor partners* [emphasis added] understand our employees don’t want to wait for several years for their next pay raise.”

Echoing this, Cardwell declared: “The leadership is aware that members often feel frustrated by the prolonged pace of previous rounds.”

As a matter of fact, what they really are frustrated about is not the pace with which the sellouts take place, but that the union bureaucrats work with management and the government to block their First Amendment-protected right to strike, and to throw back working conditions by a century.

Workers must reject this contract and prepare for the next battle for decent wages and conditions. This requires they continue to build upon the rebellion from 2022, when the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee was founded to mobilize opposition to the government-union-corporate conspiracy against them.

The Committee issued statements read by thousands

of railroad workers, organized public meetings with hundreds of attendees and organized informational pickets at major yards throughout the country. This played a major role in the shock defeat of the White House-brokered deal in voting over the fall, in spite of attempts by the bureaucrats to demoralize and confuse workers and even stuff the ballot.

This is a global struggle. This August, Canadian railroaders were first locked out by Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Kansas City, before the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau intervened to impose binding arbitration, robbing workers of the right to vote on their own contract. A major enabling role is being played by the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC), which first delayed strike action and then retreated before government threats.

The Canadian government’s move to shut down the work stoppage came after the White House intervened, indicating Washington’s fear that a major strike would not only impact profits south of the border, but encourage railroad and other workers as well.

American railroad workers should reject this agreement and link up with their Canadian brothers and sisters in a continent-wide fight. This requires the development of new, rank-and-file leadership, opposed to both countries’ corporate governments and the union bureaucrats in each country.



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