

“Looks like all the unions are going against their members”

Railroad unions conspiring with carriers to ram through de facto national agreement

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Railroaders: Tell us what you think about the new contracts by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

A conspiracy is underway between the six major US railroads and bureaucrats in the 12 rail unions to ram through a sellout deal, avoiding a repeat of the rank-and-file rebellion in 2022, which the government responded to with a strike ban.

As of this writing, at least 8 out of the 12 rail unions have announced tentative agreements at CSX. Collectively they cover over half of the company’s workforce, although some of the deals were for workers only in specific districts or subsidiaries. BNSF has announced deals with five unions. This includes with the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED), the third-largest rail union, which has also announced a deal at CSX. BNSF has also announced deals with five smaller unions.

The agreements are highly unusual in that they are taking place outside of the long-established national bargaining framework. The current contract, which was imposed by Biden and Congress in late 2022 in defiance of workers who had already voted to reject it, is not set to expire until New Year’s.

The procedure for nationwide talks between the National Carriers’ Conference Committee and the 12 major rail unions is not even due to begin until November, when both sides are due to issue their Section 6 notices staking out their initial bargaining position. This is prescribed under the onerous Railway Labor Act. Typically, talks drag on for years under near-endless rounds of legally-mandatory talks, mediation, “cooling off” periods, etc., which are designed to effectively ban strikes.

The railroads and union bureaucrats are trying to circumvent this process entirely by reaching bilateral deals on a union-by-union, railroad-by-railroad basis. This serves to carve up the resistance of workers, dividing them into dozens of different bargaining units, each with separate contracts and timetables for voting.

In imposing separate deals before national talks even start, they are hoping to head off another rebellion by railroaders, who mobilized against the last sellout contract, brokered by a

Presidential Emergency Board and endorsed by the union bureaucrats and President Joe Biden. Instead, railroaders rejected this deal and pushed for a national strike.

But in reality, these “separate” contracts are a national deal in all but name, their terms identical in all essentials. It is a huge sellout, with a pathetic 17.5 percent wage increase spread out over five years.

This is even less than the 24 percent cumulative increase imposed on workers by Congress two years ago. It is, at best, an effective pay freeze, on the unlikely assumption inflation does not rise above 3.5 percent through the end of 2029.

The other aspects of the agreements are no better. The unions claim that the deals allow workers to accrue vacation days more quickly, “improve” local work rules in unspecified ways, and maintain the current 15 percent cap on employee contributions to their health benefit plans.

Rail workers were quick to express their anger over these sorry agreements. “July 1st, our raise on the Norfolk Southern was 4.5 percent,” one worker commented on Reddit. “Why would we go backwards?!? Also, we’ve been able to use one of our weeks of vacation ‘a day at a time’ for quite a few years now.”

“At this rate, we will never get to where we are supposed to be,” wrote another worker. “It’s expensive living in the northeast corridor. We should at least get cost of living.”

Rank-and-file rebellion needed

To fight against these deals, railroaders must build upon the experiences of 2022, developing new organizations to prepare a fight against not just management, but also the sellout bureaucrats and the pro-corporate government.

The leading role in galvanizing opposition to the last contract was played by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. It held large online meetings and informational pickets, and published widely-read statements calling for workers to

collectively enforce their demand for a national strike, which could legally have taken place after a cooling-off period expired in mid-September.

Now that the union bureaucrats are trying to rapidly ram through new contracts, workers must be on guard against any attempt at ballot stuffing. In 2022, the RWRFC exposed significant irregularities in the votes, particularly at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

In press statements, BMWED president Tony Cardwell was fawning in his praise of CSX chief executive Joe Hinrichs in particular. He declare the Norfolk Southern contract an “historic milestone” made possible by the union and management “working together.” By contrast, Cardwell reacted furiously two years ago to rank-and-file demands for a national strike.

Reece Murtaugh, head of the International Association of Machinists District 19, also hailed the deal with CSX in a letter to members, without giving any further details. He also claimed the contract “contains no concessions.” But union officials claim this in every contract. The Teamsters at UPS and United Auto Workers at the Detroit 3 automakers said this about their contracts last year, only for thousands to lose their jobs.

What was revealed in 2022

What the carriers and union bureaucrats are trying to preempt is an even more explosive repeat of 2022, which raised basic class issues. That struggled revealed to railroaders that they were in a fight against the entire corporate-controlled political system.

Both right and so-called “left,” in spite of the civil war atmosphere in Washington, immediately joined hands against railroaders. Their invocation of the “national interest”—in reality, the profit interests of US capitalism—also reflected their determination to keep opposition at home from disrupting their war plans.

It also exposed the claims of the Biden White House to be the most “pro-labor” president in history. In reality, he was in alliance with the union bureaucrats against workers. The union officials played the crucial role in stalling for time until after the midterm elections, giving Congress and Biden the space they needed to prevent a strike altogether.

Even this pro-corporate “contract” that was imposed was only binding on the workers, not management. Within days, the railroads began violating its terms, including by outsourcing locomotive maintenance and announcing pilot programs for one-man rail crews, which the agreement had supposedly banned. And in the past few weeks, Union Pacific reneged on an agreement on time off, citing “labor shortages.”

There can be no doubt that the Biden administration is

playing a major behind-the-scenes role in brokering the current deals. It is also notable that they have been announced at the same time that the Canadian government imposed binding arbitration on nearly 10,000 railroad workers north of the border, following the intervention of the US Transportation Department.

The ruling class is terrified that railroad workers could become the nucleus of a broader movement of the working class. Major contracts in other key points in US supply chains expire soon, including at Boeing (September 12) and the east coast docks (September 30).

Workers everywhere are fighting against mass layoffs, automation and brutal working conditions. But some of the worst conditions in the country are on the railroads. They have been made unsafe by relentless cost-cutting, with derailments occurring on average three times a day, including the East Palestine, Ohio disaster in 2023.

The fact that deals are being concluded with Norfolk Southern, which poisoned the entire town while being shielded by the government from responsibility, adds insult to injury.

Precision Scheduled Railroading, “Hi Viz” and other brutal attendance policies keep railroaders on the job for 80 hours a week or more and drive tens of thousands out of the industry through sheer exhaustion. Using the staffing crisis which it itself has created, and misusing Positive Train Control and other new technologies, the railroads are pushing to reduce train crew sizes to a single person, effectively eliminating the conductor position. New crew size regulations by the federal government contain enough loopholes as to be nearly meaningless.

In a statement following the struggle over the last contract, the RWRFC wrote: “The fight is not over. It is only just beginning.” It called on railroad workers to help “build the new structures of workers power, to ensure that this will be the last time that a contract will be ever be imposed on us against our will!”

This is the issue which railroaders confront today.



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