

Rail union BMWED releases details of sellout agreements with CSX, Norfolk Southern

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Work at CSX or Norfolk Southern? Fill out the form at the end to tell us what you think about the tentative agreements and what you think workers should be fighting for.

At the end of August, the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees Division (BMWED) rail union announced tentative agreements with the Class I rail companies CSX and Norfolk Southern. Last week, the union apparatus began to release details of the deals, revealing them to be the latest in a series of sellout contracts dictated by management.

BMWED's proposed contracts at the two railroads are part of a broader effort by the rail union bureaucracies to force through pro-company deals across the industry before the expiration of the current contract on December 31, 2024. More than 20 separate deals have been reached between nine unions and three rail companies.

Both the companies and the union apparatuses, as well the Biden administration, are hoping to quickly secure new agreements in an effort to avoid a repeat of the 2022 rebellion by rail workers. That year, railroad workers, incensed at declining living standards and onerous work environments, rejected an agreement put forth by a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) and prepared themselves for strike action, with opposition to the deals led by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Top figures within the union bureaucracy, such as BMWED President Tony Cardwell, lashed out at workers, claiming widespread opposition among railroaders was the result of "fringe groups."

The 2022 agreement was eventually rammed down workers' throats by legislation which banned a strike and was backed by both the Democrats and Republicans and the falsely self-proclaimed "pro-labor" Biden administration.

The current efforts to impose labor "peace" on the railroads take place as the corporations and the White House are also seeking to prevent strikes at other critical chokepoints in the US economy, including Boeing and the East Coast docks, and as Washington gears up for a massive escalation of war following (or even prior to) the November elections.

While nominally not a national contract, the latest rail agreements are virtually identical across all rail unions and Class I railroads, aside from local craft-specific issues, demonstrating a concerted effort by the companies, union bureaucracies, and capitalist state to lower costs and wring even more value out of workers' labor.

In an August *Trains Magazine* article, CSX CEO Joe Hinrichs discussed the government intervention to impose the hated 2022 agreement on rail workers, stating, "They were not going to be forgiving if we had to do this again." In other words, the ruling class is desperately seeking to head off another rebellion by railroaders that comes into direct conflict with the state, which this time around would pose an even greater threat of escaping the union bureaucracies' control, especially under conditions of an intense political crisis surrounding the US elections.

But a rebellion from below by rail workers is precisely what is needed. Railroaders should join and expand the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee and organize for an overwhelming "no" vote on the tentative agreements. A rejection of the deal must be combined with efforts to take control of the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucrats and override their pro-company decisions, and to link up with airline workers, dock workers, autoworkers facing mass job cuts, and others.

On September 3, BMWED released its summary of the tentative agreements with CSX and Norfolk Southern. The union also stated within the email that Zoom calls and face-to-face informational sessions at local lodge meetings would soon commence in an effort to sell the agreement to the membership.

The TA contains cumulative wage increases of 17.5 percent over a period of five years: 4 percent in 2025, 3.75 percent in 2026, 3.5 percent in 2027, 3.25 percent in 2028 and 3 percent in 2029. These inadequate increases are offered up during a period of high inflation across the economy, as the working class struggles under monopolistic price gouging. The current contract imposed by the PEB incorporated wage increases of 22 percent between the years

2020-2024, yet, contained in a graphic on BMWE.org, the union admits an inflation rate of 21.63 percent during the same period, erasing the entire “historic” gains of the current agreement.

Within the tentative agreements are crumbs for workers that solve none of the big issues of 2022 and cost the companies virtually nothing.

The agreement provides no increase to the number of sick days. In 2022, the lack of sick days had been a major issue provoking opposition among workers. Shortly after the 2022 struggle CSX agreed to provide four sick days to BMWED workers, in what amounted to a PR stunt which did little to alleviate grueling work schedules.

The CSX TA contains provisions to prorate some vacation days to new hires. Depending on which month they were hired, new workers can receive a few paid off-days the following year. It also modifies the approximately 50-year old vacation agreement allowing workers to more quickly accrue their amount of vacation days.

The Health and Welfare section allows the creation of a second-tier employee-only benefit, an item the rail carriers have been clamoring for since at least the 2019 Section 6 notice. The railroads stated in their 2019 Section 6 notice to the rail unions: “We also need to continue the process of modernizing the health and welfare benefit plans that cover our people and retirees. The plans continue to have an outdated design, including the lack of any tiered employee monthly contributions for spouses and dependents...” Acquiescence by the union bureaucracies to this demand will only accelerate the degradation of rail worker health benefits under the guise of more “options.”

The proposed employee-only option would decrease employee contributions from 15 percent of monthly plan costs to 10 percent, or \$206 from \$309.21. While ostensibly presented as lowering health costs for single employees, the change is undoubtedly aimed at laying groundwork for shifting more of the burden onto workers. Moreover, the deal provides no limits for the dollar amount of increases to employees’ health costs from year to year. These health and welfare terms are identical under the CSX and Norfolk Southern tentative agreements.

The CSX tentative agreement also includes establishment of second-shift maintenance gangs with a \$4 per hour shift premium, a Rule 17 Question and Answer clarifying assignment of overtime, and additional allowable family members upon whose death paid bereavement leave is eligible.

The TA includes an approximately \$1-\$2.50 per hour wage increase to certain positions the company encounters difficulty filling on account of the added responsibility contained within the job duties. These “critical positions”

are Welder Foreman, Foreman, Welder, Bridge and Building (B&B) structural welder, B&B Foreman, and B&B System Foreman. It also applies a retention bonus structure to these positions. These diminutive wage increases also contain a caveat, a “catch and hold” period where an employee awarded one of the positions is ineligible to bid off for a period of one calendar year. This is a poor attempt by the carrier to attract and retain workers into these vital positions that are often spurned by more experienced employees because the added responsibilities are not worth the added pay.

The TA reached with Norfolk Southern is identical as far as pay increases and health and welfare, and differs only in the local agreements. Significantly, the probationary period for new hires is extended from 60 days to 90 days. The TA provides for a \$1 per hour pay differential for positions that require the employee to possess a commercial driver’s license. It includes a bereavement leave policy, allowing workers to have up to three days of paid leave upon the death of certain family members.

These identical agreements are being paraded about by the rail companies and union bureaucracies in an attempt by the capitalist class to get out in front of an increasingly militant working class. Workers in the US and internationally are increasingly revolting against crushing inflation, record profits handed out to the rich, and all-out assaults on worker’s standard of living while the ruling class offers up war, genocide and austerity. It is essential that railroad workers unite with their class brothers and sisters, East Coast dockworkers, autoworkers, logistic workers, workers among the entire international economic system to fight for a decent living standard.



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