

Three rail unions announce sellout contract at CSX without releasing vote details

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Several rail unions announced the passage of sellout contracts with major Class 1 rail carrier CSX on September 12 with wage packages that barely cover inflation. The contracts apply to clerical workers in the Transportation Communications Union (TCU) and carmen in the Transportation Workers Union (TWU) and the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen (BRC). Similar contracts have been proposed at SMART-TD, SMART-MD and ATDA.

As of this writing, none of the unions have released a vote tally or percentage for the contract. Commenting on the vote on Reddit, many rail workers noted that their locals had strong opposition to the agreement and that some workers did not even receive a ballot to vote.

One worker claimed that less than half of the union members in their local received a ballot in the mail. Another criticized that “Nobody [from the union leadership] asked any of us what we wanted ahead of time or what we thought about the proposal. The proposal hit the lunch room table, we all looked at it and said it needs to be better and next thing ya know there’s a vote scheduled and a week later it’s magically ratified.”

Another worker added about their upcoming contract vote, “I don’t expect to get a ballot from SMART at all. I fully expect them just to tell us it’s been ratified without ever asking us. Especially after what happened last time, when the government overruled our rejection and then our president tried to tell us that was a good thing and we won.”

All three contracts are essentially identical, setting a precedent for the rest of the rail contracts. Over a five-year term, the contract offers a 17.5 percent (18.8 percent compounded) wage increase averaging 3.5 percent a year. The wage increases will start at 4 percent on July 1, 2025 and decline by a quarter percent

each year after, ending at 3 percent in 2029.

Inflation in the US has declined over the past year to 2.5 percent in August. However, it is not certain higher inflation will not return and the contract barely reaches current inflation rates while failing to meet worker’s demands across the industry.

The contract will also include adjustments to decrease the time between vacation day accrual tiers by two years and continue the cap on employee health care contributions at 15 percent, which was set in the previous contract up from the old cap of 12.6 percent. Other healthcare changes include increasing the maximum dental benefit from \$1,500 to \$2,500 and the vision frame allowance from \$115 to \$250 and plans for the introduction of a reduced rate employee-only plan.

However, all changes to the healthcare plan are contingent on the approval of the pro-corporate National Carriers’ Conference Committee (NCCC), which acts as an administrator for the Railroad Employees National Health and Welfare Plan. This means that none of the healthcare provisions are actually part of the contract but are only suggestions to the NCCC, which may decide to reject any benefit increases as it sees fit for the industry.

The contract also includes provisions for the alteration of the deal based on the content of agreements between other rail carriers and unions later this year. Both the union and the company may issue a request to alter “core economic items” applying to pay and healthcare based on contracts between other unions and companies.

Under this language, “any disagreement between the parties regarding the interpretation or application of this understanding shall be resolved through final and binding party-paid arbitration.”

This means that the company may demand reductions in pay or benefits to match other agreements and that rank-and-file railworkers will have no say in their implementation.

Significantly, these are the first contracts between any unions and major rail carriers this year. The last contract between all Class 1 carriers and the 12 rail unions—imposed by the Biden administration to preemptively block a rail strike two years ago—does not expire until December 31 of this year.

It is common for rail contracts to go to a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) under the Railway Labor Act and go through several years of arbitration. The last contract took three years after the previous one expired to be imposed.

Efforts from the rail unions and corporations to push contracts through early and quickly is a sign that the companies are seeking to lock in lower wage costs and avoid a protracted struggle. The previous contract took years of arbitration and almost resulted in a nationwide strike by more than 100,000 workers before the union bureaucracy and the Biden administration intervened to prevent it. By pushing through these contracts early, CSX and the other carriers can base other contracts on them and work to isolate workers by securing agreements before workers can organize opposition.

Critical to this is the loyal service of the trade union bureaucracy, which has announced the passage of the company's first low-ball offer without any evidence of rank-and-file support. Even if the majority of workers did vote for the contract it is more out of distrust that the union bureaucracy would bring back anything better, rather than any satisfaction with the deal.

The union bureaucracies are certainly also wary that a long-term contract negotiation process could develop a rank-and-file rebellion against another capitulation to the rail companies and federal government. Additionally, they will have watched developments among Canadian rail workers and the 33,000 Boeing workers, who went on strike this past week, with a cautious eye, seeking to avoid a fight with management that could develop out of the labor bureaucracy's control.

The sellout at CSX demonstrates the need for workers to wage an independent struggle and place the rank and file in control. The union bureaucracies are working with management to tamp down wage growth and

prevent a confrontation with the carriers particularly as the US government escalates its military operations around the world.

During the 2022 rail struggle, workers founded the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee to mobilize opposition to the union-corporate-government alliance against the working class. Rail workers must organize rank-and-file committees to demand the release of all vote tallies and a revote if the union cannot verify ratification. These committees should unite workers across all crafts and companies to transfer power from the pro-corporate union apparatus to the rank and file.



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