

# US rail union bureaucracy denounces opponents of sellout contracts as “bad faith actors”

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*Take up the fight against the new sellout contract! Join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee by filling out the form below.*

Last week, the bureaucracy of the Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Union (SMART) lashed out against growing opposition to sellout railroad contracts with a pair of open letters published on its website.

The first was a statement denouncing the *World Socialist Web Site* for an article it published which exposed how the SMART Transportation Division’s (SMART-TD) new contract paves the way for one man crews. This article has been read by tens of thousands of railroaders across the country. The second attacked workers themselves over their supposedly unrealistic expectations for wanting more than the 17.5 percent wage increase over four years, which is contained in a series of new tentative agreements. This is even less than the 24 percent increase from the contract imposed by Congress two years ago.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is only the proximate target of the first letter. What they are really furious about is that workers are learning the truth about the contract, jeopardizing their attempts to ratify it. They are also terrified that the growing wave of strikes, including by 33,000 Boeing workers and last week’s strike by 45,000 East coast dockworkers, are emboldening railroaders to fight for their own demands.

What the WSWS reported on the BNSF contract was correct and precise, based upon the actual text of the crew consist Tentative Agreement which had been widely shared by workers themselves. Screenshots of the deal show that the top of each page is initialed by representatives from both the carrier and SMART.

While the deal does not explicitly abolish the conductor position, it clearly sets the framework for it by eliminating “All right of refusal provisions pertaining to crew size.” It also creates a “Road Utility Position,” a ground-based job with which the carriers are attempting to replace conductors

SMART makes no reference to these specific, factual details in their “response.” Instead, they claim that to even suggest such a thing is absurd because it would undermine “hard-won victories.” By this they mean toothless federal regulations on one-man crews and voluntary concessions by the carriers on sick days and time off following the strike ban in 2022.

As a matter of fact, BNSF already told industry outlet *Trains* in late 2022 that it had been in negotiations with SMART-TD “for some time now on a workable transition to ground-based conductors.” As for the “victories” cited by SMART, what is given is easily taken away: the regulations allow carriers to apply for exceptions to two-man crew requirements, and Union Pacific has already unilaterally revoked its time-off policy, citing “labor shortages.”

The rest of the letter largely consists of a series of slanders and red-baiting. Contradicting themselves, they accuse the WSWS of being not only agents of management, but “outside agitators,” a term once used by the companies to describe union organizers, and for its socialist and Marxist politics (to which we will return later in this article) which they claim has “little relevance to our day-to-day lives.”

They also claim that the contract talks are “not a cloak-and-dagger process.” This statement will elicit bitter laughter from workers, given that SMART and the bureaucrats in the other rail unions worked hand-in-glove with Washington to block a strike in 2022.

At the time, once it became clear workers would vote down the contract in droves, they subjected the process to endless unexplained delays in order to buy enough time until after the midterm elections to give Congress the space to pass a strike ban.

They responded to growing rank-and-file anger to this conspiracy with lie and threats. SMART-TD president Jeremy Ferguson made the absurd claim that the US Constitution made it illegal for workers to strike—a claim not

even company lawyers had the nerve to make. Tony Cardwell, president of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employes, threatened that workers who struck would be victimized and denounced “fringe groups” —ie, nearly the entire membership—for supporting strike action.

Serious irregularities in the balloting began to mount, with the narrow passage of the electrician’s contract in particular overshadowed by the fact that many were unable to vote. The National Conference of Firemen and Oilers announced their members “ratified” the contract without giving any breakdown of the vote beyond percentages. Then-NCFO President Dean Devita accused a WSWS reporter of “interfering in the business of my organization” when asked for more information.

The continuing need for rank-and-file oversight of the voting today was underscored with the announcement Friday by the SMART Mechanical and Engineering Department (SMART-MD), a smaller unit with a separate contract from SMART-TD, of contract ratifications at BNSF, Norfolk Southern and CSX. Last month, several smaller unions also announced contract “ratifications” at CSX in this fashion.

Meanwhile, the WSWS gained an audience among railroaders for the fact that it was the only news outlet systematically exposing the bureaucracy’s lies and by encouraging workers to take action to enforce their democratic will. In particular, the WSWS endorsed the work of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which held widely attended online meetings, issued statements and organized informational pickets.

The bureaucracy is terrified because workers are in a fighting mood. In particular, workers look at the 61 percent pay increase on the docks—and even that deal was a betrayal by the longshoremens’ union—and see no reason not to fight for substantial gains. In particular, they are determined to fight against the anti-strike laws they have been subjected to for a century, which the union bureaucrats use as a convenient excuse for why workers must accept concessions.

In the second letter published last week, SMART-TD’s Jeremy Ferguson argued that workers “cannot fixate on the percentages of another union’s general wage increases”—referring to the 30 percent wage offer at Boeing, without mentioning the far higher offer on the docks. Anyone demanding more, he argues, are “bad-faith actors who want us to fail.”

With this statement, Ferguson exhibits incredible bureaucratic arrogance and contempt for workers’ intelligence. The use of the phrase “bad-faith actors” is also ripped from the Democrats’ attack on the WSWS for its criticism of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other pseudo-lefts in and around that party for their support for war and for

capitalism—which includes their vote two years ago in favor of the rail strike ban.

The bureaucratic hatred of the workers finds its most politically explicit form in the anticommunist attacks on the WSWS. The bureaucracy instructs the WSWS’ thousands of readers on the railroads that socialism “has no relevance to our day-to-day lives,” but it is Ferguson, who makes \$420,000 a year from workers’ dues, who is totally distant from workers’ lives. He and the other bureaucrats are creatures of corporate board rooms and the government, not workers’ leaders.

Ferguson and company denounce socialism because they defend inequality, corporate dictatorship and a political system which denies workers their basic rights, including the right to strike. Every inroads by workers against this state of affairs jeopardizes their own privileges, which are dependent on their ability to impose labor peace. SMART’s endorsement of senator Josh Hawley (and the Teamsters’ de-facto endorsement of Trump ) shows this outlook also brings the bureaucracy into a natural alliance with fascism.

The WSWS, by contrast, is socialist because it is for workers power and against a social system, capitalism, where the rich control everything while the majority who create the wealth are left powerless and in poverty. It advocates the replacement of capitalism with a system of democratic political power and control by the workers themselves, which will run the railroads and the other major industries in the interests of society as a whole and not profit. This is what socialism represents.

Support for workers’ power is also why the WSWS encourages workers to form rank-and-file committees to prepare a fight against the bureaucratic dictatorship inside the unions. The working class is the most powerful force on earth, if it is organized. In the 21st century, this requires that workers break free from the straitjacket of the pro-corporate union bureaucrats and develop new structures that they control, and which unite workers across industries and national boundaries.

This underscores the need of railroaders to continue the struggle which began two years ago. The most direct answer to Ferguson is to continue building the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which emerged as the center of opposition in 2022.



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