

US rail maintenance of way workers reject contract at CSX, while union apparatus rejects direct elections of top officials

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Take up the fight for rank-and-file control! Join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee by sending an email to railwrfc@gmail.com or filling out the form at the bottom of this page.

On Monday, the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees announced that workers overwhelmingly rejected a sellout contract at CSX. Those who voted rejected the contract by a more than two to one margin, with 1,330 casting “no” votes and 616 voting in favor.

The contract at Norfolk Southern was declared ratified by a vote of 710 to 480. But both of these votes were marked by extremely low turnout. Only 38 percent cast ballots at NS, while turnout was somewhat higher at CSX, at 47 percent.

In other words, the Norfolk Southern contract was “ratified” by 23 percent of total eligible members.

Neither the CSX nor Norfolk Southern contract has any significant support. The contract contains only a 17.5 percent pay increase spread over four years, even lower than the the contract which was imposed by Congress two years ago.

The Biden administration intervened to ban a national strike in 2022 after a massive rank-and-file rebellion defeated attempts to ratify a government-backed sellout. A key role was played by the rail union bureaucrats, who subjected workers to endless delays in order to buy Congress time to pass an anti-strike law. Meanwhile, the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee was formed to give mass opposition among railroaders an organized and conscious form, and to appeal for support in the wider working class.

Now, the rail unions are attempting to disrupt workers’ unity by circumventing the national bargaining process entirely, which does not even formally begin until next month. Instead, they are trying to divide workers up into

dozens of mostly identical contracts, attempting to pass as many of these as soon as they can in order to isolate opposition.

While around two dozen tentative agreements have been reached at NS, CSX and BNSF and the 12 major rail unions, no tentative agreements at all have yet been announced with Union Pacific, Canadian National or Canadian Pacific Kansas City. This is a clear sign that management at these carriers want contracts that are even worse.

The companies and the union bureaucracies appear to be seeking to isolate train crews, who are among the most militant railroaders because their conditions are some of the worst. No contracts have yet been announced for Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET). Only one contract has been announced by the SMART-TD conductors union, with BNSF. That deal paves the way for one-man crews by creating a ground-based position which the carriers are aiming to replace conductors with, as well as by abolishing “[a]ll right of refusal provisions pertaining to crew size.”

Railroad workers must reject these contracts on principle and mobilize against the bureaucrats’ divide-and-conquer tactics. In a recent statement, the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee called on railroaders to organize and “demand a national contract with real gains which will set an example for workers everywhere.”

Railroaders “are in an even more favorable position than we were two years ago, because workers all over the country and the world are striking,” the committee explained, citing in particular strikes at Boeing and on the East Coast docks. “The bureaucrats know this and are terrified of us. That is why they are lashing out, with Jeremy Ferguson and SMART-TD declaring anyone not content with their wage proposal is ‘a bad faith actor.’”

The union bureaucrats are the bad faith actors, not the rank-and-file workers opposed to the contract.”

BMWED bureaucracy to workers: We know best

The bureaucracy’s contempt for the will of the membership was on full display this past week at the convention of the BMWED’s Allied Federation, a subunit of the union covering 6,000 members. A major issue of discussion at the convention was a proposal to allow for direct election of officers by union members.

But after what the BMWED’s website described as a “serious yet polite debate,” the union delegates “overwhelmingly decided that delegate election of officers allows for the most engaged and well-versed members to make critically important decisions, equipped with the best grasp of the issues facing the Allied Fed.”

In plain language, the BMWED bureaucracy voted for themselves, on the grounds that they know best. Significantly, the delegates also elected Brian Thompson as general chairperson “by acclamation,” meaning without any opposition.

While they claim that this is to allow for decisions to be made on behalf of the membership by those who are most “well versed,” the reality is the vote was a decision to uphold the most naked form of bureaucratic dictatorship within the union. The vote expressed the hatred and fear the bureaucracy feels for rank-and-file workers. This sentiment was expressed openly by BMWED President Tony Cardwell two years ago, when he threatened retaliation against those workers who sought to enforce the decision of the membership to strike.

However, every major union is run as a dictatorship, even those which hold direct elections carefully controlled by the apparatus. The BLET, for example, held an “election” in late 2022 with only one opposition candidate for president, Eddie Hall, with all other national offices uncontested. Eddie Hall won the election in an upset, as engineers voted for him to express their hatred of the BLET’s policies.

When Mr. Hall shared an article from the WSWS reporting this fact, the BLET sought to have him thrown off the ballot. He was eventually allowed to take office only as part of a deal which ensured the continued position of the bureaucracy.

Last year, the International Association of Machinists

District 19 was caught red-handed stuffing the ballot in its national elections, prompting the intervention of the Labor Department. However, the victorious opposition candidate, Reece Murtaugh, is one of those pushing through sellout contracts today.

But far more than the experiences at the BLET and IAM, the BMWED apparatus is afraid that direct elections could create a situation like at the UAW, where socialist autoworker Will Lehman ran a campaign calling for abolishing the UAW bureaucracy. Lehman gained significant nationwide support, while the preferred bureaucrat of the US government, Shawn Fain, was “elected” on a turnout of 9 percent (Lehman has an ongoing lawsuit against the Labor Department over its refusal to investigate massive irregularities in the vote).

The bureaucracy cannot be reformed from within or from mass pressure from below. It must be overthrown and replaced with leadership structures, rank-and-file committees, composed of and democratically controlled by workers, not officials making six figure salaries out of workers’ dues money.

The formation of militant new organizational structures must be connected to a new strategy, uniting railroad workers across the country with the working class as a whole, in a common fight against Wall Street, both pro-corporate parties and the union apparatus.

“At bottom, this is a fight to transfer power to the working class,” the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee concluded in its recent statement. “We have to end the control of the rich and reshape society for our own interests, the interests of the majority. Many times in the past, railroaders have given the lead to a broader movement of the working class ... We can and must lead a struggle again.”



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