

Norfolk Southern conductors reject sellout deal by more than 81 percent

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Railroad workers: Tell us how you're voting and why on the latest contracts by filling out the form below! All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Conductors at Norfolk Southern (NS) rejected a tentative agreement by more than 81 percent, according to results certified by the SMART-TD union last Thursday. Turnout was particularly high at 68.6 percent.

The vote is the latest blow to attempts by the union bureaucrats to ram through rail contracts even worse than the one imposed by Congress in a strike ban in late 2022. Earlier this month, members of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) rejected a contract at CSX by a more than two-to-one margin.

The rail union bureaucrats are trying to pre-empt another rank-and-file rebellion like what occurred two years ago by passing as many separate deals as possible before national bargaining officially begins next month. Dozens of separate, bilateral agreements between the dozen rail unions and three of the six Class I carriers have been announced. This is effectively a national contract because the terms are nearly identical, with a 17.5 percent pay increase over four years, even less than the 24 percent imposed by Congress.

Railroaders are furious over the deals, although many smaller unions have claimed they have “ratified” contracts without releasing vote totals, prompting suspicion from workers.

Workers responded enthusiastically to news of the NS rejection on Reddit. “This is the first step on our way to address wage disparities!” one conductor wrote, referring to the fact that NS conductors make \$30,000 to \$50,000 less per year than at other Class I carriers.

Another wrote: “Out of around 500 people I asked, only one person said they’re voting for it, and I think he might’ve been being sarcastic. A year ago we were trying to strike because of 22% [wage increases], and now we were being offered 17% in exchange for younger guys to

get their vacation a little earlier and free vasectomies. This agreement literally and figuratively was to cut our balls off.”

Significantly, SMART-TD has announced the results of the vote on its website. An official document certifying the results, however, was circulated on social media.

The decision to announce an early contract at Norfolk Southern was especially provocative, not only because of the pay disparity but also given the role of management in the disaster in East Palestine, Ohio where a deliberate “vent and burn” of derailed chemical cars poisoned an entire working class town.

At BNSF, officials from SMART-TD have also produced a tentative agreement which would pave the way for eliminating the conductor position by creating a ground-based Road Utility Position. The carriers have been trying for years to replace conductors with ground-based roles and run trains with only a single engineer. Only days after Congress banned a strike in 2022, BNSF announced a “pilot program” for one-man crews, which it had quietly worked out with SMART-TD.

The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which played a leading role in building opposition to the pro-company bureaucrats two years ago, issued a statement earlier this month which declared: “Organizing on the principle that we workers have the right to prepare any and all actions deemed necessary to protect and improve our conditions, we must take control out of the hands of the bureaucrats and the pro-corporate parties.”

It continued: “To maximize our strength, we must not only unite across the rail industry but with workers in other industries as well, across the US and the world who are also fighting against sellouts.”

Across the US and the world, workers are coming into conflict with the sellout union bureaucrats. The NS vote was announced the day after 33,000 Boeing workers rejected a sellout deal by 64 percent which would have

ended their six-week strike. The stand taken by workers was a blow not just to the bureaucracy of the International Association of Machinists but to the Biden White House, which negotiated the deal in order to restart production at a major defense contractor.

On Sunday, workers from four continents discussed a global strategy for the working class in defense of jobs and living standards in a meeting sponsored by the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

The Boeing vote has emboldened workers elsewhere. The day after, Eaton workers in Jackson, Michigan, who have also been on strike for more than a month, rejected another sellout by an even wider margin than they had in a previous one. Eaton, a major supplier for Boeing, is the scene of three strikes, including another in southern Illinois and one in Britain.

Furious over growing opposition, United Auto Workers officials threatened violence against WSWS reporters the day of the vote while they were interviewing workers opposed to the deal. In another sign of fear and hatred of rank-and-file workers, SMART-TD issued a statement attacking the WSWS after its reporting on the BNSF contract went viral. However, they could not refute a single fact which the WSWS reported.

More contracts announced at CSX as BMWED sends survey to members

The critical issue is not pressuring the bureaucrats to back down but to organize a rebellion to transfer power from the apparatus to the workers. If anything, the attempts to ram through new rail contracts are accelerating.

Also last week, two more rail unions, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and the National Conference of Firemen and Oilers (NCFO) announced a tentative agreement with CSX Transportation. CSX has announced contracts with 13 different unions, accounting for 60 percent of its workforce, according to management.

The IBEW agreement contains the same as all the others, including a paltry 17.5 percent wage increase. The deal also includes the ability for workers to carry over unused sick days year after year, for a total of up to 20 days. But this is meaningless given that CSX only instituted four paid sick days early last year.

The NCFO has yet to release details of its agreement, but it undoubtedly contains the same provisions. These agreements have yet to be ratified by the membership.

Also at CSX, the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees sent out a survey to the membership, specifically addressed to the 68 percent of workers that voted no on the contract. The survey was obviously designed to tease out a way to ram through virtually the same deal with minor changes. It did not even include any questions on pay or other key issues.

On October 23, the BMWED bureaucracy quickly scheduled a Zoom meeting with members to get out in front of rank-and-file anger. A worker who attended the Zoom meeting told the WSWS: “Basically I felt like the Zoom call was more about voting yes now, because if it goes national, according to the union officials, then there’s a high likelihood that we will not get a better agreement than the one that was presented to us in the first tentative agreement.”

Another worker said: “I think, in my opinion, if our union constantly throws PEBs [Presidential Emergency Boards, a form of government mediation] in our faces, and the government has their noses in all of our affairs, then that makes the union a part of the government. If our union fought for us as hard as they do to [placate] the carriers, we wouldn’t be in this position.”

Rejecting these sellouts is only the first step. Workers must continue building an alternative leadership in the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which played an integral role in opposing the 2022 agreement.

By organizing themselves in structures they control, railroaders will have the freedom to establish lines of contact with Boeing workers, dockworkers, autoworkers and other key sections of the working class also fighting cuts, as well as railroaders in Canada and in other countries.



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