

Railroad workers have had enough

written by Stephen Millies

September 24, 2022



Rail workers in Chicago rallied Sept. 21 to keep up the pressure on railroad bosses.
Photo: Jonah Furman

President Biden announced a tentative agreement on Sept. 15 between the railroad monopolies and unions representing 115,000 railroad workers. It still has to be voted upon by union members.

The terms may include a 24% increase in wages over four years and a retroactive pay package. Railroad bosses are notorious for agreeing to new contracts years after the old one expired.

A big issue is not being penalized for taking off work to see a doctor. None of these items have been officially disclosed. Everything had to be clawed out of the railroad outfits.

Railroad workers have been [under attack for decades](#). While there were two million workers employed on U.S. railroads in 1920, their number is now less than 150,000.

The capitalist economy would still grind to a halt without their labor. Wheat, corn, lumber, steel, cars, chemicals and coal are shipped by rail. So are many other items.

The elimination of almost all passenger trains outside of Amtrak's Northeast Corridor may lessen the railroad industry's visibility. Deindustrialization, especially the closing of many steel mills, has cost thousands of railroad jobs.

Yet globalization depends on freight trains carrying double-stacked containers from seaports to their destination. The seven big U.S. and Canadian "class 1" railroads hauled in [\\$27 billion of net income](#) last year.

That's more than [twice as much](#) what these railroads paid in wages. Meanwhile, CSX CEO James Foote [raked in \\$20 million](#).

These vast profits don't prevent rail bosses from turning the screws even tighter on workers. Earlier this year BNSF arbitrarily imposed a new attendance policy without any consultation with unions.

Workers are being threatened with being fired for going to a doctor or even a hospital visit. Forget about taking your child to the clinic.

BNSF is completely owned by the Berkshire Hathaway conglomerate, whose CEO Warren Buffett has a [\\$94.6 billion fortune](#).

Most transportation workers don't have Monday through Friday work weeks. Neither do millions of workers in hospitals, restaurants and other 24/7 workplaces.

Many freight engineers and conductors are on call with no set work schedule. They may be forced, along with other railroaders, to be away from their families for a week or more.

Yet their justified demand for more sick days, even if unpaid, was fought by railroad companies.

Railroad lobby lies

The Association of American Railroads has for decades been spreading lies about railroad workers. The AAR called safety rules "featherbedding." Train crews were slashed.

Railroad companies want to operate lengthy freight trains with just one worker. Or none at all, with the trains operated by remote control.

The tragic result of these cutbacks was the Lac-Mégantic rail disaster in Quebec, where 47 people were killed in 2013. This runaway train had just a one-person crew.

Railroad capitalists aren't satisfied with getting rid of 1.3 million jobs over the last 75 years and tearing up 100,000 miles of track. They got rid of most passenger trains before dumping them on Amtrak.

These money bags have a new scheme misleadingly called "precision scheduled railroading." It [destroyed 45,000 railroad jobs](#) in the last six years, a 29% cut in employees.

Surface Transportation Board Chair [Martin Oberman](#) said that the class 1 outfits have “cut labor below the bone... In order to make up for the shortage of labor, they are overworking and abusing the workforces they have.”

Trains have increased in length to as much as two miles or more. Railroad yards have been abandoned or downsized. Even the big capitalists who are railroad shippers are angry at the decline in service.

[According to the Surface Transportation Board](#), the class 1 outfits paid out \$196 billion in dividends and stock buy-backs over the last 10 years. That’s far more than the \$136 billion that railroads spent on new equipment and maintaining the right-of-way.

For almost two centuries the government has lavished subsidies upon the railroads. The latest example is the \$14 billion the feds spent on positive train control, a safety system that was decades overdue.

The most notorious of these handouts were the vast land grants stolen from Indigenous nations. Custer had it coming and he died for the Northern Pacific railroad, now part of BNSF.

Thousands of miles of track were laid by enslaved Africans, both before and after the Civil War. The “steel-driving man” John Henry was a prisoner who was worked to death building the Chesapeake and Ohio railway, now part of CSX.

Warren Buffett needs to pay reparations.

Shooting down workers

Striking railroad workers were shot down in 1877 by troops sent by President Rutherford B. Hayes. He betrayed Black people by letting the Reconstruction governments be overthrown by the Ku Klux Klan.

Jay Gould broke the 1886 strike on the Missouri Pacific, now part of the Union Pacific. The rail tycoon declared he could hire one half of the working class to shoot the other half.

General Miles shot down railroad strikers in Chicago in 1894. This war criminal had Geronimo captured and later seized Puerto Rico as a U.S. colony in 1898.

The current negotiations happened a century after railroad workers employed in shops and roundhouses revolted against a 12% wage cut. Nearly 400,000 workers walked off the job on July 1, 1922.

President Warren G. Harding and his thoroughly corrupt administration smashed the strike. At least 10 workers were killed by the National Guard and private detectives across the country.

In 1991, George H.W. Bush was woken in the White House to sign a bill ordering railroad employees back to work. The current negotiations were also met by threats of government intervention.

After years of the big business media claiming the workers and their unions don't matter, the White House had to get involved.

Joe Biden may be smiling, but he wouldn't have tolerated a strike, either. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi had legislation ready to crush it.

All workers have the right to strike. If union members vote to reject the proposed agreement and need to strike, every poor and working person should support it.

A coast-to-coast strike will inspire millions like the Black Lives Matter movement did.

The writer is a retired Amtrak worker and a member of the American Train

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