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# **As railroad workers fight for dignity and sick leave: Stop government strikebreaking!**

written by Stephen Millies  
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Railroad workers and supporters protest BNSF CEO Kathryn Farmer outside Alliance, Nebraska, Nov. 2.

Every worker has the right to withhold their labor. Concerted action and collective bargaining by workers are supposed to be protected by law.

That hasn't stopped President Biden from demanding on Nov. 28 that Congress stop over 100,000 railroad workers from striking.

The man in the White House said he was "reluctant to override the ratification procedures and the views of those who voted against the agreement." [Yet Biden](#)

[insisted](#) that Congress enforce a tentative deal “without any modifications or delay.”

The House of Representatives [promptly voted on Nov. 30](#) to impose an agreement by a vote of 290 to 137. The Senate agreed and Biden signed the bill forcing the contract on railroad workers without their consent on Dec. 2. So much for the democratic right of railroad workers to vote on their contracts.

This is the thanks the labor movement gets for helping to stop the expected Republican landslide in the midterm elections. Forgotten were the volunteers dispatched from Black churches and union halls.

Railroad workers have been under attack for decades. Employment has fallen from [1.5 million workers in 1947](#) to [just 147,000 today](#).

This 90% drop in employment was the reason that Warren Buffett told Bloomberg Businessweek that he had his Berkshire Hathaway conglomerate gobble up the BNSF railway.

BNSF has 32,000 miles of track in 28 states as well as British Columbia and Manitoba in Canada. Yet there are only 35,000 workers that make the system’s trains operate from Chicago, Alabama and Texas to California and the Pacific Northwest.

It was the BNSF that imposed a harsh new attendance policy earlier this year. Workers will be punished for being absent no matter what the reason, including going to a doctor.

Railroad management imposed these rules during the COVID-19 pandemic that killed so many transportation workers. At least 156 [New York City area transit workers](#) died of the coronavirus.

As noted in a [statement from the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees](#)

[Division-International Brotherhood of Teamsters](#), “the railroad is not a place to work while you’re sick. It’s dangerous. It requires full concentration, situational awareness, and decision-making.”

BNSF employees can be fired for taking off just five holidays during their entire decades-long career. People get sick on holidays, too.

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

### **Job cuts kill**

Railroad tycoon Warren Buffett doesn’t have to worry about sick days. His fortune has [ballooned to \\$109.2 billion](#) while over a million people in the U.S. have died from the coronavirus.

As Willie Adams, International President of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), pointed out, “Warren Buffett can afford to pay wages for railroad workers who get sick and need to stay home or see a doctor.”

Under collective bargaining, BNSF’s drastic change in attendance policy was supposed to be subject to negotiation, not imposed by management.

A union grievance – which on railroads is called a time card – would describe it as being “arbitrary and capricious.” Yet the Trump-appointed [Federal Judge Mark Pittman ruled](#) that workers couldn’t strike over this issue.

It’s the labor movement that fights for safety on the job. Back in 1909, one in nine train workers were injured, while one in 205 were killed annually on U.S. railroads.

The response of the old Interstate Commerce Commission – abolished in 1996 in the name of deregulation – was to stop collecting these embarrassing statistics. (“The

Economic History of the United States” by Ernest Bogart)

For decades the Association of American Railroads attacked safety rules, claiming workers were being coddled. The AAR bosses called these absolutely necessary regulations “feather bedding.”

Crew sizes were cut in both the U.S. and Canada. An inevitable result was 47 people killed in the 2013 train wreck in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec. A lone engineer was the only crew member on a long train of oil tank cars.

### **Shooting strikers**

What made these job cuts more heartbreaking was that Black and women workers were finally being hired in many railroad jobs.

This took decades of struggle. Charles Hamilton Houston, who mentored Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, repeatedly went to the U.S. Supreme Court to fight discrimination on the railroads.

Philip Randolph, the leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, helped organize the great 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech there.

One of the March on Washington’s ten demands was a \$2 per hour minimum wage. [That’s worth \\$19.41](#) per hour today.

Biden’s attack on rail labor comes a century after railroaders 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.

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.

Railroad strikers, led by the future socialist leader Eugene V. Debs, were killed by General Nelson Miles in 1894. This war criminal had Geronimo captured and later seized Puerto Rico as a U.S. colony in 1898.

In 1991, George H.W. Bush was woken in the White House to sign a bill ordering railroad employees back to work.





A rally in support of railroad workers was organized by International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 10 at the Port of Oakland, California, on Oct. 27. Photo: IndyBay.org

## **Fighting for all workers**

Today railroad workers are again fighting for justice. Their simple demand for more sick days is being denied. So is their right to spend more time with their families.

Billionaires and banksters are lined up against railroad workers. One of the most hypocritical claims of the wealthy and powerful is that a rail strike will endanger

clean water by disrupting shipments of chemicals to purify it.

This is the same ruling class that poisoned the children of Flint, Michigan, with dirty water. U.S. sanctions preventing the shipment of chlorine to treat water and sewage helped [kill 500,000 children in Iraq](#).

Just six railroad monopolies control 90% of railroad mileage in Canada and the United States. These criminals abandoned at least 50,000 miles of railroad.

Using the speed-up system called “Precision Scheduled Railroading,” [another 61,000 railroad jobs](#) have been eliminated since January 2015.

Meanwhile, these rail outfits [paid \\$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.

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

Such a struggle will inspire millions like the Black Lives Matter movement did.

*The writer is a retired Amtrak worker and a member of the American Train Dispatchers Association and Transportation Communications Union.*



