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To hell with the railroad barons: The railroads belong to the people!

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Baltimore, Dec. 8. SLL photo: Sharon Black

Nobody should be surprised by President Joe Biden's strikebreaking role in imposing a contract on railroad workers. The agreement had already been voted down by workers in several unions.

The imposed contract fails to address the need for sick days or any time off — paid or unpaid — for employees subject to call 24/7. Workers can still be written up for seeing a doctor or taking their children to a clinic.

Remember that “Amtrak Joe” had represented the Du Pont dynasty as a U.S. senator from Delaware for 36 years. He loyally served the Mastercard plastic loan sharks, also based in Delaware, in that U.S. House of Lords.

Biden worked with the late Senator Strom Thurmond, a vicious racist, to fight school integration. In the 1990s, Biden helped pass laws that increased the prison population to over two million.

The man in the White House can stop a strike of working people seeking fair treatment. But Biden refuses to use his pen to free 78-year-old Leonard Peltier. The Indigenous political prisoner, a leader of the American Indian Movement, has spent 46 years in jail after being framed.

What now?

The BNSF Railway’s harsh and arbitrary attendance policy remains in place. This scheme assigns 30 points to every employee.

Except for vacation days, two points will be deducted for being absent on any day from Monday through Thursday. Three points will be taken away for taking off on a Sunday.

Workers will be fined four points if they don’t come in on Friday or Saturday. Federal holidays are the grand prize.

Being sick on those days will cost an employee seven points. Never mind that workers and their family members get sick on holidays, too. Many days of overtime are required to earn back new points.

Even the capitalist courts claim to consider people innocent until proven guilty. The BNSF — completely owned by super billionaire Warren Buffett’s Berkshire Hathaway hedge fund — automatically penalizes workers who “mark off” whether or

not they and their children are ill.

One of Buffett's BNSF serfs can be fired for "losing" 30 points despite having a decades-long good record. Railroad management imposed this crap in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic without any negotiating with the unions.

The contract imposed by Biden and Congress doesn't address any working conditions. Many freight engineers and conductors are on call with no set work schedule. They may be forced to be away from their families for a week or more.

So are the maintenance-of-way employees who fix the track. They have to live in bunk cars or motels during the week, sometimes hundreds of miles away from home.

These issues go beyond wages, although that "big wage increase" that the media mentions will be eaten up by inflation. All workers deserve dignity.

An Amtrak yardmaster told this writer that when he worked on the Norfolk Southern Railway, a trainmaster demanded that he do stretching exercises. It was as if this worker and father were back in kindergarten.

Profits first, safety last

This lack of respect has only increased since the introduction of the speed-up system called Precision Scheduled Railroading. There's nothing precise about PSR.

Even capitalists in the chemical, food and other industries [have complained](#) of increased train delays. "They've cut labor below the bone, really," Surface Transportation Board Chair Martin Oberman [told](#) the House Transportation Committee on May 12. "In order to make up for the shortage of labor, they are overworking and abusing the workforces."

PSR helped destroy [62,000 railroad jobs](#) between [March 2015 and November 2022](#).

The 30% plunge in jobs and service delays is linked to increasing the [average train length](#) by 25%. Many railroad yards were closed or downsized.

A relentless drive to reduce crew size resulted in the Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, tragedy. Forty-seven people were killed there in 2013 when a runaway train of oil tank cars exploded. There was only one crew member, an engineer, on the train.

PSR was the brainchild of the late Hunter Harrison, the son of a Memphis, Tennessee, cop. [Harrison's daddy](#) helped enforce racial segregation laws for a local ruling class that helped kill Dr. Martin Luther King.

Harrison introduced PSR on the old Illinois Central Railroad, which was gobbled up by the Canadian National Railway. Harrison became the Canadian National's CEO and imposed PSR on all the railway's workers.

Yet as of Dec. 1, all Canadian railroad workers and a million other "federally regulated" employees in Canada [will get 10 sick days](#) annually. Why are Canadian railroaders getting sick days while the U.S. Congress refused to provide any?

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau serves the banksters just as U.S. politicians do. A big difference is that a million workers joined a general strike called by the Canadian Labor Congress on Oct. 14, 1976. They were protesting the cutback policies of Justin Trudeau's father, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.

Many Canadian workers vote for the New Democratic Party, which was co-founded by the Canadian Labor Congress. That's unlike the U.S. Democratic Party, which was founded by the slavemaster and rapist Thomas Jefferson.

This greater political awareness includes labor defending former Black Panther Party member Mumia Abu-Jamal, who was framed and has spent 41 years in Pennsylvania prisons. The [Ontario Federation of Labor](#) voted in 2011 to "reaffirm its support of Mumia Abu-Jamal and step up its efforts to win his freedom."

We need a people's takeover

The mere threat of a strike has forced both the [Union Pacific and CSX](#) railroads to slightly modify their severe attendance policies. As Frederick Douglass declared, "If there is no struggle there is no progress."

In 1877, a co-worker of Douglass, Peter Clark, addressed striking railroad workers in Cincinnati. ("1877: Year of Violence" by Robert V. Bruce.)

The drop in railroad employment from 2 million workers in 1920 to 150,000 a century later has devastated communities coast-to-coast. These job cuts accelerated as Black workers and women workers were finally being hired in more jobs.

Hamlet, North Carolina, was an important junction on the old Seaboard railroad, now part of the CSX system. Because of the loss of railroad jobs, many local workers were hired by the non-union, low-wage Imperial Foods plant instead.

Twenty-five workers were [killed there on Sept. 3, 1991](#), when a fire broke out. The plant's owner, Emmett J. Rowe, locked the doors because he thought workers - many of whom were Black - would steal chickens.

White and Black workers died together because of Rowe's racism. Forty-nine children were orphaned.

Over 50,000 miles of U.S. railroad lines have been abandoned. The seven big U.S. and Canadian "class 1" railroads [hauled in profits](#) of \$27 billion last year.

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

The railroad monopolies owe not only sick days but reparations. Nine thousand miles of track were laid by enslaved Africans before the Civil War.

Thousands of more miles were built afterward by Black prisoners like [John Henry](#), the “steel driving man.” Henry was worked to death by the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, then run by Collis P. Huntington, and now part of CSX.

Hundreds of Chinese workers died building Huntington’s Central Pacific Railroad across the Sierra Nevada mountains. General George Custer had it coming, and he died while leading an incursion into Lakota Sioux land for the Northern Pacific Railway, now part of BNSF.

Instead of BNSF being owned by Warren Buffett with his \$100 billion-plus fortune, it should be run by the people. To guarantee jobs, service, and safety, we need a people’s takeover of the railroads.

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

