



Speak Out Now

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The Railway Workers' Fight Is Our Fight

Last Friday, President Biden signed a Congressional resolution to impose a contract on railway workers. He and Congress took this action in spite of the fact that the majority of railway workers had voted to reject that very same contract. Despite the exceptional profits that the railway companies are making, Congress didn't direct the companies to meet the workers' demands. The politicians in Congress, from right wing Republicans to the so-called progressives Democrats, are the same. They stuck together to defend the companies and demand that the workers shut up, suck it up, and get back to work. This is an attack, not just on the railway workers, but on all of us — the working class as a whole.

The companies, through the corporate media, say that they are being generous, offering workers a 24 percent wage increase over five years. But workers haven't had a pay increase in three years — throughout the pandemic. In addition, with record inflation chewing up workers' paychecks, this wage increase means little to nothing.

As any railway worker will tell you, the problem isn't just their paychecks. The railway workers' struggle is taking place after decades of attacks on their working conditions. Over the last six years, railway companies have cut their workforce by 29 percent, firing 45,000 workers. The remaining railway workers are stretched to the breaking point. Workers have no regular schedule. They are on-call at all times, expected to work, often in distant locations, at the drop of a hat.

The demands workers were making weren't just about wages and benefits. They are centered on quality of life issues. The life of a railway worker means no personal time whatsoever. Seeing family and friends? Not if the company wants you to work. Vacations? Forget it. Workers are forced to travel from hotel to hotel, at their own expense, to be where the company wants them. And most importantly, railway workers have no right to take a day off if they are sick or need to see a doctor. The workers' were demanding 15 days of paid leave so they can work to live, not live to work.

For the past three years, the companies, the politicians, the media and everyone else celebrated railway workers as "essential workers." And the workers stepped up! Just like

healthcare workers, transit workers, and workers in supermarkets and stores, the train drivers were out in public, risking infection from the COVID virus. Meanwhile the investors and executives got to quarantine themselves and conduct their business remotely.

Those unessential CEOs and investors did nothing to help the situation — they just took the profits. Railway companies raised their fees to take advantage of the supply chain crisis as demand surged, and the pandemic disrupted shipping. Before the pandemic, they had increased railway fees by ten percent since 2002. During the pandemic, the companies jacked up their fees another five percent. The profiteering continues. Warren Buffet's Berkshire Hathaway, which runs BNSF Railway, one of the biggest railroads, saw its profits rise by four percent to \$4.4 billion during the first three quarters of the year.

During Thanksgiving week, Buffet's personal wealth increased by nearly \$1.4 billion in a single day. With that money, Buffet could pay for the 15 days of sick leave workers are asking for. Likewise, Union Pacific railway increased its profits by 11 percent to \$5.36 billion during the same period.

The government officials, both Democrats and Republicans, have spoken. They are on the companies' side. The contract that they imposed contains provisions for only one sick day and a wage increase that has already been eaten by inflation.

The railway bosses called on their government to use its power to force the railway workers to work under that contract. They didn't want to risk a strike — none of the bosses did. They fear the railway workers and they fear us because they understand our power. We do all the work to make society run and that means we can bring it to a halt. Do we understand the power we have, like the bosses and the government do? We need to.

The railroad workers may not yet be ready to defy the government right now. But one way or another, we are all under the same attack. And sooner or later, the fight is coming, and we all need to be prepared. The railway workers' fight is our fight.

An injury to one is an injury to all!