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USA

Democrats Vote to Stop Railway Workers from Striking; The Squad Fails the Test

- IV Online magazine - 2022 - IV575 - December 2022 -

Publication date: Monday 5 December 2022

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President Joe Biden, who had promised to be the most labor friendly president in history, worked with the U.S. Congress to outlaw a railroad union strike and to impose a new contract on the industry covering approximately 135,000 workers. Under the Railway Labor Act, Congress passed and the president signed the law making it illegal for unions to strike and imposing a contract that gives workers no paid sick days, the workers' principal demand. Only eight Democrats voted against.

Five of the six members of "the Squad," a group of six progressive and socialist Democrats, voted with the majority to impose the contract, with only Squad member, Representative Rashid Tlaib, voting against. Three of the Squad members who voted to impose the contract, Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, Cori Bush, and Jamaal Bowman, are members of the Democratic Socialists of America. They chose loyalty to the Democrats over loyalty to the working class. And the Democrats, of course, are loyal to the corporations.

After voting to impose the contract, the House also voted to give workers seven sick days, and then bill then went to the Senate. But this was simply a fig leaf to cover the Democrats' betrayal of the railroad workers, since it was clear the bill would fail in the Senate. Senator Bernie Sanders championed the sick-days bill in the Senate, but as expected, it failed to win the 60 votes necessary there. Sanders then voted against imposing the contract.

How did it come to this? The contract had been in negotiation for three years as the railroad employees, considered to be essential workers, labored throughout the COVID pandemic. At the same time the railroads introduced a new system called "precision scheduled railroading," increasing demands on employees' time while reducing the work force by 40,000 jobs. The new system meant that workers had less time with their families and were forced to go to work even when sick or otherwise be disciplined or even fired. Twenty years ago, railroads' average profit was 15%, today they average 41%, and as railroad profits went up, their stock price also rose by 30 to 60 percent.

With the contract negotiations stalled and unions threatening a strike that could paralyze the economy, Biden invoked the Railway Labor Act, which gives the president and Congress power to intervene in railway union negotiations and strikes. In June 2021, Biden mandated mediated negotiations between the 12 railroad unions and eight railroad corporations.

Negotiations dragged on, so on September 14, Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh hosted negotiations, and on September 15 Biden announced a deal. The unions would get a 14.1% wage increase, but provided no sick days and only one additional persona days. By early November the contract was rejected by four of the 12 rail unions. So, Biden convinced Congress to vote to prevent a strike and impose a new contract, with a 24% wage increase, but one without sick days.

So what now? Some railroad workers have called for a strike, which would be illegal. That seems highly unlikely. Many railroad workers feel betrayed by Biden and the Democrats and some say they will seek revenge in the next election, which means abstaining, voting Republican, or for a minor party.

The largest group on the left too now faces a crisis. DSA had passed a position on November 30 calling on Biden and Congress to accept the workers' demands, but then three of its own members in the House voted to impose the contract. The Seattle DSA has passed a resolution calling the vote to impose the contract a betrayal, demanding an explanation from the three DSA members who voted for it, and praising Tlaib who did not. Beyond this issue, this experience calls into question DSA's national strategy of supporting Democrats. Though it is unlikely that DSA will

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break with its national political strategy, there will be a struggle over it and some will recognize that we need a socialist workers party.

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