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USA

The Tale of an Almost Strike: Workers, Unions and Politics

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Earlier this month, twelve U.S. railroad unions representing 150,000 workers who moves 40 percent of the country's long-distance freight (not passengers) threatened to strike over wages, working conditions, and health issues, though at this moment—owing to politics and labor law—such a strike seems unlikely. On September 15, President Joe Biden announced that Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh working with the railroad companies and the unions had been able to reach a tentative agreement.

“These rail workers will get better pay, improved working conditions, and peace of mind around their health care costs: all hard-earned,” Biden said when announcing the deal. “I thank the unions and rail companies for negotiating in good faith and reaching a tentative agreement that will keep our critical rail system working and avoid disruption of our economy.”

The handling of this matter, which comes out of 150 years of experience, is classic, though the urgency of this political movement is unique.

Railroad workers were driven to threaten this strike by continuous employer pressures for greater productivity, by their lack of sick days, and by rising prices.

In the United States, where railroads are privately owned and make billions in profits, there were one million railroad workers in 1950, but through consolidation, automation, and simple management pressure, that number has been reduced today to just 150,000.

“The job is just really becoming fewer people doing more work faster,” Ross Grooters, a locomotive engineer for Union Pacific in Iowa and co-chair of Railroad Workers United told a reporter. Railroad workers, like many U.S. workers, had a contract that didn't provide for any sick days. And with an inflation rate of 8.5 percent, workers also felt that they had to win a pay increase, and if that took a strike, they were ready to walkout.

U.S. labor law, however, makes a national railroad strike nearly impossible. The law was created because of the devastating impact of past strikes all crushed by government violence. The 1877 Baltimore and Ohio Railroad strike destroyed millions in property and took 100 lives. The Pullman strike of 1894, led by Eugene V. Debs, involved 250,00 workers, and cost 40 lives, while the shop crafts strike of 1922 involved 250,000 workers and cost ten lives.

Determined to end the railroad strikes, the U.S. Congress passed the Railway Labor Act in 1926, which is still in effect today. The RLA was intended to end strikes by forcing employers and unions into a long, tedious process of mediation under the National Mediation Board. When the parties and the board have reached a tentative agreement, that begins a 30-day cooling-off period during which neither bosses nor workers can take any further action. The last national railroad strike was led by the Machinists Union in 1992.

Union activists complain that they don't know exactly what's in the new contract. “It's impossible right now to make heads or tails of what this agreement means, and it's disgraceful how opaque is it,” said Ron Kaminkow, a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen. Workers have apparently won a 24% wage increase, amounting to an average wage of \$110,000 by the end of the contract in 2024 as well as \$5,000 in bonuses. Workers will also receive their first paid sick day, and additional unpaid days of medical leave, as well as more flexibility in scheduling.

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For Biden and the Democrats, now facing Republicans in the mid-term elections on November 8, it was imperative to stop the strike which would have caused very serious economic problems for the country, further disrupting supply chains and halting production in many plants.

The unions and workers could still vote this plan down, but they had been offered significant improvements and the pressure from the politicians, the bosses, and some union officials to accept it will be enormous.

18 September 2022

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