

THE FRONT LINE: POLITICS & JOBS

Rail Talks Continue Amid COVID-19 Concerns

Slowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, meetings remain underway to reach terms on a new national freight rail agreement — a pact that will directly affect the pay, benefits and working conditions of thousands of IBEW members.

“It’s a slow process,” said Railroad Department Director Al Russo Jr., “but we’re paying close attention to what’s going on.”

The IBEW and the other nine members of a coordinated bargaining coalition formally started negotiations on a new agreement shortly before the previous pact expired at the end of 2019.

“We are on the threshold of the most critical round of national bargaining in a generation,” the committee said in a statement. “We understand the importance of each union’s autonomy to pursue membership-specific goals within a framework of broad solidarity to defend and improve the wages, benefits and working conditions of our members.”

The first formal negotiating session toward a new national agreement took place, in person, toward the end of February. The second meeting, scheduled for a month later, was canceled shortly after the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus a global pandemic, as were all subsequent in-person meetings.

The parties spoke formally in July, when bargaining teams from the 10 unions participated in a video conference with National Railway Labor Conference Chairman Brendan Branon and representatives from the participating rail carriers to review the sides’ positions.

“The meeting was beneficial to both sides in our effort to keep the process moving forward in a good faith effort to achieve a voluntary agreement,” Russo said, adding that informal lower-level meetings have been taking place as well.

On negotiators’ minds are the nearly 50,000 railroad workers who have lost their jobs over the past four years. Layoffs have directly affected hundreds of IBEW members within that time period, thanks largely to the efficiency scheme known as “precision scheduled railroading.”

First experimented with on the Canadian National railroad, PSR has been in use on some of the largest freight rail systems in the U.S. since 2017. The strategy drastically consolidates rail services, costing jobs while deferring crucial equipment and facility maintenance.

Workers who manage to keep their positions must then deal with a raft of issues, such as needing railroad supervision to make power, crafts getting crossed and maintenance being deferred, with inspections often performed by unqualified or untrained individuals. The potentially less-safe working conditions that result are complicated by railroads’ increasing reliance on heavier and longer trains.

“Meanwhile, the furloughs caused by recent rail business slowdowns have directly resulted in railroads using the coronavirus as camouflage for obtaining Federal Railroad Administration waivers to lay off more workers,” Russo said. “This has only exacerbated an already dangerous situation.”

At the same time, the billions of dollars in emergency funding allocated in the March coronavirus stimulus package to help keep U.S. rail systems running were almost completely spent by October, and there had been no sign of progress toward approval of a second stimulus package as The Electrical Worker went to press.

Russo noted that other major issues going forward in contract negotiations will naturally include general wage increases as well as health and welfare concerns including vacation time and sick time.

“Railroad workers know that they’re essential employees from the moment they’re hired,” he said. “They might not have signed up to risk their lives day in and day out on the job, but they’re doing it anyway because they know how important their jobs are.”

Jointly, the coordinated bargaining coalition unions represent more than 105,000 railroad workers covered by the various organizations’ national agreements, and they comprise more than 80% of the workers who will be affected by this round of negotiations.

The other unions in the bargaining coalition are the American Train Dispatchers Association, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen, the International Association of Machinists, the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, the National Conference of Firemen and Oilers, the Transport Workers Union of America, the Transportation Communications Union, and the transportation division of the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers (better known as SMART-TD).

Members of the unions participating in the coalition will be kept apprised of further developments on contract negotiations as developments warrant, Russo said. The conditions of the most recent contract remain in force until a new agreement is implemented.

In August, 12 rail unions collectively sued the largest rail systems in the U.S. over efforts to forcibly reconfigure health care networks and to restrict access to certain medications.

The dozen-union coalition involved in the pending lawsuit includes the 10 organizations in the Coordinated bargaining coalition, plus the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees and representatives of SMART’s mechanical division. The coalitions’ members and families are covered by the National Railway Carriers/United Transportation Union Plan and the Railroad Employees National Health and Welfare Plan.