**Headline:** Why Workers Are Up in Arms Over the Rail Strike Intervention

**Teaser:** The rail industry can thank Congress and the president for helping it secure $321 million in annual profits at the expense of workers.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

The United States Senate acted in a show of rare unity recently in [voting 80 to 15](https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/01/politics/senate-rail-vote) to pass a bill forcing rail workers to accept their employers’ contract offer without a strike. There was no such unity to pass an amendment introduced by Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) that would have given rail workers seven paid sick leave days. That bill did not pass even though [52 senators voted for it](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/senate-reaches-deal-vote-avert-rail-strike-rcna59600), as it failed the requisite 60-vote threshold.

According to the [Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen](https://www.brs.org/?zone=/unionactive/view_article.cfm&HomeID=883696), “Almost every elected member of Congress campaigns on being ‘for the working class.’” But, in response to the failure to pass the sick leave amendment, the Brotherhood pointed out that Congress’s actions “demonstrated they are for the corporate class.”

The Brotherhood is [among several unions](https://www.cnbc.com/2022/12/01/rail-unions-warn-of-election-consequences-with-labor-deal-in-senate-.html) representing a little more than [100,000 people](https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/29/business/rail-strike-threat-recedes) working in the rail industry. This is more than half of all rail workers in the U.S. According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](https://www.bls.gov/ooh/transportation-and-material-moving/railroad-occupations.htm#tab-5), “Because trains operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, railroad workers’ schedules may vary to include nights, weekends, and holidays. Most work full time, and some work more than 40 hours per week.” A job so crucial that the entire U.S. economy is dependent on it pays a median salary of less than $65,000 a year with no paid sick leave whatsoever.

Explaining why Congress felt it necessary to pass a bill to make it illegal for rail workers to strike for better conditions, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi [said](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/30/us/politics/rail-workers-strike-house.html), “A nationwide rail shutdown would be catastrophic—a shutdown would grind our economy to a halt, and every family would feel the strain.” President Joe Biden similarly [explained](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/12/01/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-congressional-action-to-avert-a-rail-shutdown/) that the congressional intervention in averting a rail strike would help avoid “devastating economic consequences for workers, families, and communities across the country.”

An economy that devastates *workers*, leaving them underpaid for a high-pressure job with no sick days, is apparently just fine.

Instead of using its power to force the private rail companies to grant paid sick leave to rail workers, Congress used its levers of power to side with corporate forces rather than with workers. It chose to uplift profits over workers’ needs.

The cost of those profits is tangible and minuscule. Sanders [pointed out](https://twitter.com/SenSanders/status/1597736598950625280?s=20&t=x2Mjy1V0RbSjmdaeo3qkSg) in a tweet on November 29 that, “Guaranteeing 7 paid sick days to rail workers would cost the rail industry a grand total of $321 million a year—less than 2 percent of its profits.” Meanwhile, he added, “Rail companies spent $25.5 billion on stock buybacks and dividends this year.”

To help private rail companies secure $321 million a year in profits, Congress and the president inserted themselves into contract negotiations and sold out more than 100,000 workers.

As President Biden [said](https://www.nbcnews.com/business/economy/bidens-vow-union-president-tested-first-year-rcna12791) in September 2021, “I intend to be the most pro-union president leading the most pro-union administration in American history.” But nearly 30 years ago as a U.S. senator—on the matter of the rail industry in particular—he was more pro-labor than he is today, becoming one of a handful of senators to vote against averting a rail strike. Then-Senator Biden, explaining his ‘no’ vote, [said in 1992](https://twitter.com/MorePerfectUS/status/1597667053657526272?s=20&t=Qy_mD1SAaFvXTqCsP0ucjA), “I am… concerned that we are rewarding a concerted decision of the railroads [to negotiate in bad faith] that would have caused fevered expressions of outrage by industry had the unions taken a similar step.”

Today’s congressional intervention indeed rewards the private rail industry that has been engaged in a relentless bid to cut costs in the service of profits.

Corporate media outlets, whose business model is in line with rail companies, have disproportionately amplified lawmakers’ pro-industry talking points. But what are worker unions saying?

The [International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers](https://smart-union.org/smart-td-statement-on-congressional-intervention-in-the-national-rail-negotiations/), one of the unions involved, said it “does not support the notion of Congress intervening in our collective bargaining negotiations to prevent a strike.”

Instead, the union said, “If Congress truly wants to take action to improve the industry for our members, then we recommend legislation that will work to reverse the devastation of Precision Scheduled Railroading [PSR].”

Buried near the end of one article, Associated Press [explained](https://apnews.com/article/biden-economy-strikes-congress-94089be6a4f469444da99fec9dde1b3e) the gist of PSR without mentioning it by name, saying that, “The rail industry has aggressively cut costs everywhere and shifted its operations to rely more on fewer, longer trains that use fewer locomotives and fewer employees.”

According to rail company [Union Pacific Railroad](https://www.up.com/customers/track-record/tr091019-precision-scheduled-railroading.htm) (UP), this method “keeps inventory (and supply chains) moving.” UP touts PSR’s “benefits to Shippers and Receivers,” who are the company’s’ primary customers. The company makes no mention at all of the toll this “efficiency” has taken on its workers.

Congress could have used its power to force rail companies to address the impact of PSR on workers. But instead, it used its power to side with corporate rail industry profits. It is an underlying assumption of how our society and government are structured that any intervention in the acquisition of profit is seen as a threat to the economy.

It’s no wonder rail workers feel [betrayed](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/30/business/freight-rail-labor-union.html). One Chicago worker named Rhonda Ewing told the New York Times ahead of the congressional vote, “We know it’s holiday time, which is why it’s the perfect time to raise our voices. If Biden gets involved, he takes away our leverage.”

Coming so soon after the 2022 midterm elections and far enough from the 2024 presidential election, lawmakers have few worries about losing reelection bids based on their voting record. This suggests that Congress and the president timed the votes to maximize *their* political leverage.

But rail workers are not likely to forget the government’s betrayal. “The political pandering and showboating by the elected officials in the Railroad’s pockets will not diminish our resolve nor remove the respect each Signalman is owed for keeping the economy afloat on a daily basis,” said the [Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen](https://www.brs.org/?zone=/unionactive/view_article.cfm&HomeID=883696) in a press release.

And other workers who are increasingly in solidarity with one another in an economy obviously rigged to benefit wealthy corporate employers, are angry too. The [National Day Laborer Organizing Network](https://www.facebook.com/NDLON/posts/pfbid035yUqmyTu9jj4pphdsvutQXobeALNpzrQthjNjrB1L3B1iGhq2pYCdg4nDbF388Tjl), for example, accused Biden of siding with “wealthy bosses,” and reiterated its support for unions saying, “we will always be in solidarity with all workers.”

Unions are drawing battle lines, demanding that the government flip the script of who the national economy is supposed to benefit.

“The Federal Government inserted itself into the dispute between the railroads and the Railroad Workers under the premise that it must protect the American economy,” [wrote](https://www.bmwe.org/secondary.aspx?id=726) Tony D. Cardwell, president of BMWED-IBT, one of the rail unions involved in negotiating contracts. “Yet,” he said, “when the Federal Government makes that decision, its Representatives have a moral responsibility to also protect the interests of the citizens that make this nation’s economy work—American Railroaders.”

In other words, we need an economy that works for the people, not the other way around.

Cardwell [warned](https://www.bmwe.org/secondary.aspx?id=726) that the lawmakers’ actions are “nothing less than anti-American, an abdication of their oath of office,” and that, “you are deemed, in my eyes, unworthy of holding office.”