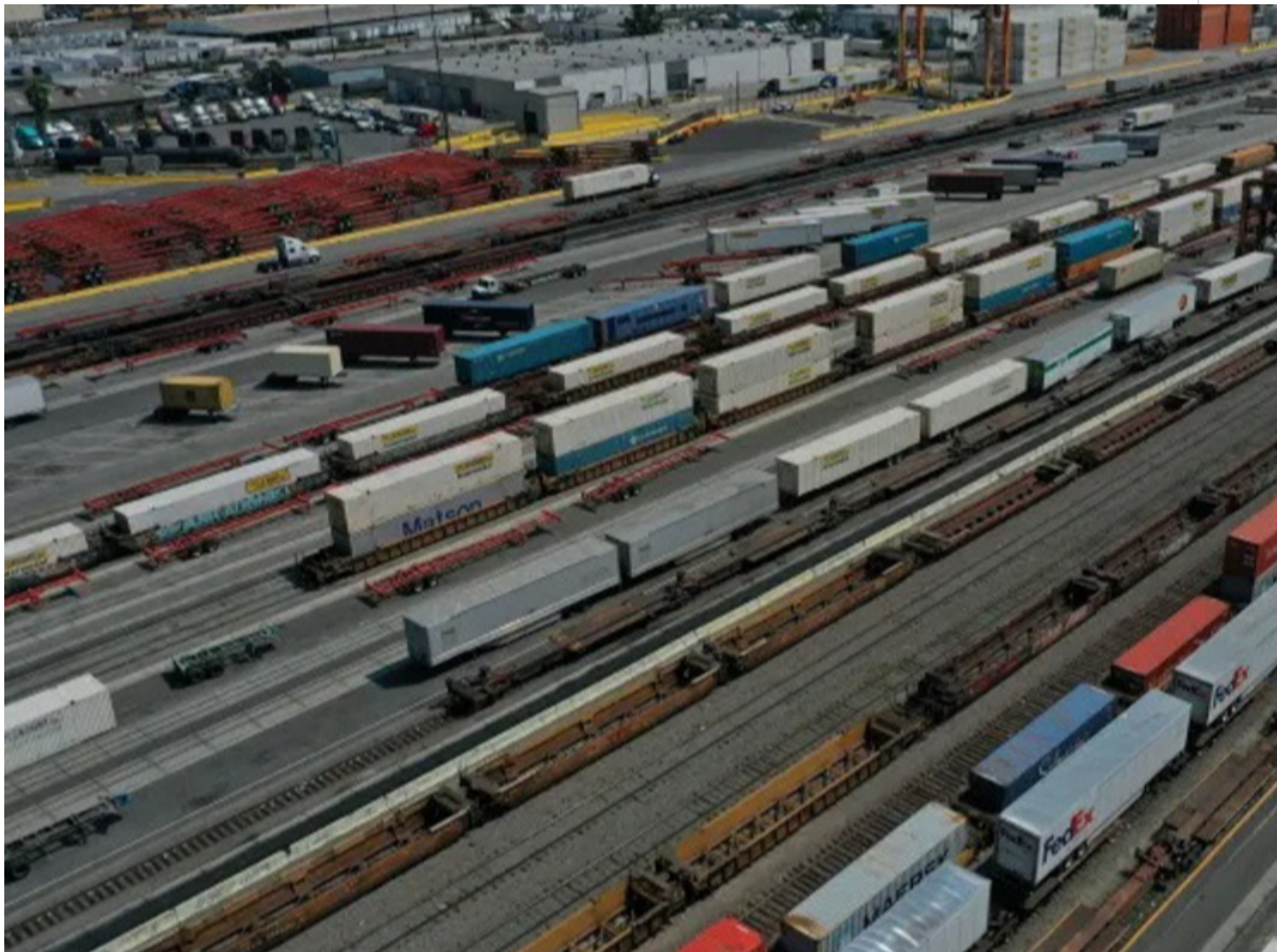


Strike looms as U.S. railroad union votes down tentative contract deal



An aerial view of shipping containers and freight railway trains at the BNSF Los Angeles Intermodal Facility rail yard in Los Angeles (Photo by Reuters)

New York, November 24 (RHC)-- The United States' largest rail union has voted against a tentative contract agreement reached with rail management in September, raising the likelihood of a strike in the upcoming month, which can cause significant damage to the U.S. economy.

Train and engine service members of the transportation division of the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers (SMART-TD) narrowly voted to reject the deal, while members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) voted to ratify the agreement and SMART-TD yardmasters voted to ratify their national agreement, the unions said.

The split vote by the two largest unions representing conductors and engineers could put pressure on Congress to intervene to prevent a strike ahead of the holiday season. "The ball is now in the railroads' court. Let's see what they do. They can settle this at the bargaining table," said SMART-TD President Jeremy Ferguson in a statement, adding, "This can all be settled through negotiations and without a strike."

The National Carriers' Conference Committee (NCCC), which represents the nation's freight railroads in talks, said the "continued, near-term threat" of a strike "will require that freight railroads and passenger carriers soon begin to take responsible steps to safely secure the network in advance of any deadline."

The railroads, however, showed no sign of being willing to reopen talks, saying, "Congress may need to intervene – just as it has in the past – to prevent disruption of the national rail system."

The standoff between US rail operators and their union workers disrupted flows of hazardous materials such as chemicals used in fertilizer and disrupted US passenger railroad Amtrak service in September as railroads prepared for a possible work stoppage. Such an industrial action, business groups have warned, could strand vital shipments of food and fuel.

Seven of the 12 unions involved in the talks previously approved the deal that was based on a recommendation from a presidential emergency board, while three unions previously had voted against it, but agreed to extend a strike deadline until early December.

Beginning on December 9, SMART-TD would be allowed to go on strike or the rail carriers would be permitted to lock out workers, unless Congress intervenes. If there is a strike by any of the unions that voted against the deal, BLET and other rail unions that have ratified agreements have pledged to honor picket lines.

The Biden administration helped avert a service cut-off by hosting last-minute contract talks in September at the Labor Department that led to a tentative contract deal. White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said last month "any shutdown would be completely unacceptable. It is the responsibility of the parties involved to resolve this issue."

Last week, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce said Congress should step in to prevent a potential rail disruption, warning it would be catastrophic for the economy. Automaker General Motors has said a halt would force it to stop production of some trucks within about a day.

A rail shutdown could freeze almost 30% of U.S. cargo shipments by weight, stoke inflation, cost the American economy as much as \$2 billion per day and unleash a cascade of transport woes affecting U.S. energy, agriculture, manufacturing, healthcare and retail sectors.

The unions represent 115,000 workers at railroads. While labor unions criticize the railroads' sick leave and attendance policies and the lack of paid sick days for short-term illness, the railroads say the deal has the most "generous wage package in almost 50 years of national rail negotiations."



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