

Why Richard Ojeda is not a fighter for the working class

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In the midst of the ongoing strike of 30,000 West Virginia teachers and school employees, one local Democratic Party politician, Richard Ojeda, is being given favorable attention in the corporate media.

On Wednesday, Ojeda was interviewed in the US edition of the British *Guardian*. On Friday, he was the subject of a flattering feature-length profile in the Washington DC-based website Politico.com. Both portrayed the current West Virginia state senator and 2018 Democratic congressional candidate as someone whose statements in support of teachers and 24 years in the United States military make him a fighter for the working class.

In reality, Ojeda is a capitalist politician whose cheap talk about supporting the teachers is aimed at giving Democrats and the union leaders influence over the strike so they can keep it under control and shut it down. His political career is being supported by a powerful group within the Democratic Party leadership who fear the growth of social opposition among workers and who believe the Democrats must make verbal appeals to workers to prevent them from taking up a political struggle against the two-party system.

Ojeda portrays himself as someone whose military past proves his populist bona fides. His five-paragraph campaign biography deals entirely with his record in the US Army Airborne, which includes multiple tours and commendations in Iraq, Afghanistan—two countries that have been devastated by American involvement, with over one million dead. Ojeda rose from second lieutenant to major in the course of more than two decades as an army officer.

In boasting of his record of service to the Pentagon, which carries out brutal wars abroad to defend the interests of American corporations, Ojeda marks himself as an enemy of the working class, both in the countries ravaged by American imperialism, and within the United States itself. This is also proven by his final position in the military: “as the Executive Officer overseeing Army recruiting from Beckley, WV to Virginia Beach.” In other words, Ojeda’s job involved convincing impoverished youth, the children of miners and teachers, to join the military and become cannon

fodder for American imperialism.

Furthermore, for all Ojeda’s talk about taxing corporations, increasing workplace safety regulations, and funding social programs, he supported the billionaire Donald Trump in the 2016 elections. “If he does twenty percent of what he promises, he’ll be a decent president,” Ojeda told the *New Yorker* magazine just after Trump’s election win. “And maybe he just will make America great again.”

Trump ran on a platform of gutting regulations, slashing taxes for the corporations and the billionaires, and Senator Ojeda cannot be surprised that Trump has carried these plans out. During Trump’s first year in office, deaths at US coal mines doubled after the president eliminated safety regulations and appointed a former coal executive to head the Mine Health and Safety Administration. The federal government has done nothing to stop the devastating consequences of drug companies pouring opioids into the state. Ojeda bears political responsibility for the impact of Trump’s policies on the working class.

Ojeda’s justification for voting for Trump changes depending on his audience. For example, in a January 2018 appearance on the “progressive” YouTube program “Young Turks,” he tried to downplay his 2016 vote for Donald Trump, saying “this was about my neighbors” and that he was upset over high unemployment in Logan County, a coal mining area in which he grew up. He explained that he could not vote for Hillary Clinton after supporting Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary.

But when he was running for state senate in 2016 in a district that voted heavily for Trump, he struck a different tone, advancing xenophobic and racist sentiments in a cynical effort to win votes. In a language reminiscent of Trump’s fascist current and former advisers Stephen Miller and Steven Bannon, Ojeda told the *New Yorker* in October 2016:

“When you hear about illegal aliens getting benefits and you have people here starving to death and can’t get nothing, it’s just a slap in the face. When you start talking about bringing in refugees and when they get here they get

medical and dental and they get set up with some funds—what do we get? So when people hear Donald Trump saying we’re going to take benefits away from people who come here illegally and give them to people who work, that sounds pretty good.”

No worker can support a politician who calls for “taking benefits away” from the roughly 12 million members of the working class who happen to be in the United States without proper documents. How can any worker trust a politician who claims he supports the poor and working class, but supports forcing immigrant workers to live in total poverty with no public support? By pitting workers against one another based on race and national origin, Ojeda is employing a classic “divide and conquer” tactic of the corporations.

When Ojeda speaks to left-wing audiences like “Young Turks,” he changes his tune again. In an attempt to build his name recognition and raise money, Ojeda said in the January 2018 interview that his policy regarding immigration is that “open arms is what we should be all about. Let’s show people love regardless of where they’re from.” During this interview, Ojeda made not one criticism of the policies, deregulations, corporate tax cuts, and war policies Trump has initiated.

With such chameleon-like political shifts, it was not difficult for Ojeda to appear in public to support striking teachers with a primary election for the Democratic nomination for Congress just two months away. But those on strike in West Virginia have good reason to wonder what Senator Ojeda tells Governor Justice and Republican legislators in closed-door meetings at the capital.

Ojeda’s real purpose is to provide the Democratic Party with a “pro-worker” veneer so that it can better carry out its pro-corporate program. This was on display during the interview with the Young Turks, when Ojeda said he was a Democrat because “I believe in what the Democratic Party is all about.” He rejected the views of those who say the Democratic Party is “falling from grace,” and said “to me the Democratic Party is all about taking care and looking out for the working class citizen ... taking care of the sick, the elderly, the veterans, helping people who live in poverty elevate themselves out of poverty.”

West Virginians reading these lines must wonder what planet Ojeda has been living on for the last several decades!

The Democratic Party has run the state of West Virginia for most of that time. Democrats, working with Republicans, have gutted social programs, deregulated the industries, forked over trillions of dollars in tax cuts to the corporations and the super-rich, and broken numerous strikes. Was the Democratic Party “looking out for the working class” when counties began using injunctions under Democratic

Governor Gaston Caperton to force teachers back to work under threat of jail time during the 1990 strike? What about when Democratic President Jimmy Carter filed an injunction against striking miners in the nationwide coal strike of 1977-78?

The Democratic Party is a capitalist party whose job is to enforce the interests of the banks, corporations, and the military-intelligence agencies. Democratic administrations have spent trillions on wars to open up Libya, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and countless other countries to exploitation by American companies.

Ojeda opposes any questioning of the “right” of the military-intelligence agencies to take from the poor and working class in order to fund these wars of corporate plunder abroad. His campaign website says: “The best way to keep Americans safe is to let our military do their job without muddying up their responsibilities with our political agendas.” This could be interpreted as a call to overturn the constitutional requirement that civil authorities exercise control over the military. Ojeda is calling for the military to dictate the policies of the government. He calls for the military to be “relentless” and says that in Syria and Iraq “we must be consistent with airstrikes.”

Ojeda is just like the rest of the Democratic and Republican politicians—always willing to boast about America’s ability to kill abroad (in his words, the US has “a military that could kick everybody’s ass”), but never interested in asking in whose interests the wars are being fought or how that money could be put to use, not for killing on behalf of the oil companies, but to provide health care, education, infrastructure, jobs, and other social programs that workers need.

These right-wing, anti-worker, pro-capitalist positions have earned him praise from the leadership of the Democratic Party and the powerful corporate interests that back the party. Ohio Congressman Tim Ryan, who last year made a bid to unseat Nancy Pelosi as House Minority Leader, told Politico: “these are the kinds of candidates that we need to recruit.”



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