

On eve of Pennsylvania vote

Trump, Democrats race to the right

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On the eve of Tuesday's special election in a western Pennsylvania congressional district, President Donald Trump visited the Pittsburgh area for a campaign rally, while both state and national Democrats attacked the administration from a right-wing standpoint, criticizing Trump as insufficiently nationalistic on trade and unduly soft and credulous on North Korea.

The March 13 election in the 18th Congressional District, which occupies the southwest corner of the state, adjacent to West Virginia, is to fill the vacancy created by the resignation of the longtime Republican incumbent Tim Murphy, who resigned in a scandal. Trump carried the district in the presidential election by 20 percentage points, but his administration is so unpopular among workers that the congressional race is a virtual tie in pre-election polling.

The rally Saturday night near the Pittsburgh airport was nominally in support of the Republican candidate, state legislator Rick Saccone, but Trump barely mentioned the candidate, focusing, as usual, on himself, denouncing the media, and making a series of bigoted and fascist remarks, particularly in supporting summary execution of alleged drug dealers (see: "Trump calls for execution of drug dealers at Pennsylvania rally").

Significantly, Trump made almost no reference to the huge tax cuts for the wealthy and big business which Republican strategists have portrayed as the party's main achievement. Given the composition of the 18th district, which is predominantly working class and one of the few remaining heavily unionized industrial areas, Trump focused instead on his decision to impose tariffs on steel and aluminum imports, which he claimed was already bearing fruit in terms of reopening plants—a claim that was preposterous, given that he only signed the executive order on Thursday afternoon.

The Trump administration is making the same propaganda claims for the executive order on tariffs that it did for the business tax cut, citing a handful of supposedly "pro-worker" actions by the corporations, while ignoring the overall trend. After the tax cut, corporations handed out a few hundred million dollars in employee bonuses, while initiating \$170 billion in stock buybacks, dividend payouts and other measures to share the tax windfall with their big shareholders. In similar fashion, a single steel plant reopening has been announced, but that will be endlessly publicized as though Trump's trade war measures were producing a renaissance of American industry.

More significant than Trump's now familiar racist, misogynist and completely vulgar ranting was the Democratic response, which was to criticize Trump's policy actions of the past week from the right, from the standpoint of an even more ferocious economic nationalism and a more comprehensive defense of the interests of American imperialism.

Conor Lamb, the Democratic candidate in Tuesday's special congressional election, has avoided public criticism of Trump on any issue, while adopting a series of policies identified with the Republican Party, including opposition to raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour and to any effort to restrict the possession of assault rifles. He is running on his record as a Marine Corps veteran and federal prosecutor.

Other Pennsylvania Democrats praised Trump's imposition of tariffs on steel and aluminum imports. Senator Robert Casey, who is seeking reelection in November, hailed the president for taking "action to protect our steelworkers." Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto said, "There is no doubt that if we get a more level playing field, the opportunity to produce more steel is very real."

Other Democrats seeking reelection in industrial states sounded the same note, including senators Sherrod Brown of Ohio, Joe Donnelly of Indiana, and Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin. Most top Democrats have indicated that their only concern with the tariffs was that they should not hit US allies like Canada, but should be targeted against major rivals like China and Russia, which account for only a small fraction of US steel imports.

Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer told the *Washington Post* Wednesday, “I totally agree, wholeheartedly agree with President Trump’s instinct to go after China ... All of these academics [say] anytime you try to do anything on trade, it’s protectionist. They ought to not let that deter them, but they ought to put together a real plan that works.”

Perhaps the most revealing response to Trump came from Senator Elizabeth Warren, a leader of the Democratic Party’s liberal wing, who appeared on three of the five Sunday interview programs, on NBC, CNN and, for the first time, Fox News, in what amounted to a media test drive for a potential presidential bid in 2020.

In all three appearances Warren criticized Trump’s announced willingness to hold a summit meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, warning that Trump was unprepared for such a meeting, had failed to properly staff the State Department and had never appointed an ambassador to South Korea.

She told CNN, “When you’re going into negotiations like this, it matters to have the people there first who are working and who are advising about the economy and about our military objectives and who know the players and know the history... I am very worried that he’s going to go into these negotiations and be taken advantage of.”

Warren also criticized Trump from the right on trade tariffs, although she backed his initial action. “I think tariffs are one part of reworking our trade policy overall,” she said. “We need a trade policy that’s comprehensive, one that makes a distinction between the trading partners that follow the rules and the trading partners that break the rules like China.”

On Fox, Warren adopted an even more openly right-wing stance on the talks with North Korea, adapting to her audience. She remarked, “One of the things we have to remember is that the Kim family, dictator after

dictator for generations now, has been holding for a face-to-face negotiation with an American president. This is the big prize for them, just being able to be in the same picture with him. And a reason for this is the Kims have seen this as an opportunity both to legitimize their dictatorship and to legitimize their nuclear weapons program.”

Similarly, on trade, she pointed out that Trump had only imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum. “I think what it takes is you got to think about trade in a much broader way,” Warren said. “It’s very much about tariffs but it’s also the negotiations, for example, have been about things like intellectual property rights and copyrights and access to domestic markets.” This last is a reference to major issues that have arisen in US trade talks with China.



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