

Las Vegas Culinary Workers Union stumps for “anybody but Bernie”

Adam McLean
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In the run-up to the Nevada caucuses on Saturday, that state’s Culinary Workers Union has come out strongly against Bernie Sanders while formally maintaining the position that it supports no particular candidate.

Democratic strategists consider the Nevada caucuses and South Carolina primaries important because the winners of those contests would have momentum going into “Super Tuesday” primaries in 14 states. According to several recent polls, Sanders currently has a double-digit lead in Nevada.

After first putting its weight behind Biden and coming just short of endorsing him, the CWU stepped back after his debacle in Iowa and New Hampshire. Its campaign against Sanders, however, continues in full force.

The union’s criticisms of Sanders share many of the elements of the Democratic Party’s right-wing smears. Secretary Treasurer Geoconda Argüello-Kline claimed that Sanders supporters “viciously attacked the Culinary Union and working families in Nevada simply because our union has provided facts on what certain healthcare proposals might do to take away the system of care we have built over 8 decades.”

In fact, the CWU executives faced backlash on social media. They received messages accusing them of being “corrupt,” “incompetent” and of “operating in bad faith,” after they began a campaign against Sanders’ call for “Medicare for All.”

The CWU operates the “Culinary Health Fund,” which provides healthcare to over 130,000 Nevadans, the CWU’s members, and their dependents, and is one of the state’s largest healthcare providers. While nominally non-profit, such funds have served as vehicles for the enrichment of a thin layer of union bureaucrats.

The Culinary Health Fund’s board of trustees includes Argüello-Kline as well as Donald “D” Taylor, the national president of the CWU’s parent union UNITE HERE. It is jointly administered by and receives funding from a number of Las Vegas casinos.

While the union touts the fund as one of the biggest benefits of being in the union, there have been a number of complaints from workers with existing conditions about the limitations of the fund’s coverage.

Marcie Wells, a waitress with the CWU, told *Democracy Now!* that “there are moments when I’m not able to get into the specialist I need to see in a timely manner, so I end up missing a lot of work, not qualifying for the insurance and sort of not even having the resources from work to pay for that insurance,” referencing work requirements needed to be eligible for the coverage.

She continued: “Well, if you’re going to the Culinary Health Center, there are not copays. But at the same time, there aren’t any specialists there. So, a person like me would still have to go outside of that location. It’s \$15 for a regular doctor visit, \$20 to \$30 per specialist visit. If I need an MRI, which I do frequently, it’s \$125 each time. An endoscopy is \$150.”

This context explains the reaction of the union to even modest proposals like Sanders’ healthcare reforms. The CWU, seeing the threat to their incomes and their privileges, has issued flyers denouncing Medicare for All as a plan that would “end Culinary Healthcare.”

It is not that the CWU fears that Sanders’ proposal would reduce its members access to healthcare. Rather, the CWU fears that such plans would undercut their own operations.

For his part, Sanders has responded the attacks against him with characteristic obsequiousness. He said

in the debates Thursday night, in response to allegations of online attacks from his supporters, “And if there are a few people who make ugly remarks, who attack trade union leaders, I disown these people. They are not part of our movement.”

He went so far as to denounce those supporters who were critical of the unions as Russian bots. “All of us remember 2016, and what we remember is efforts by Russians and others to try to interfere in our election and divide us up. I’m not saying that’s happening, but it would not shock me.”

Sanders’ Medicare proposal, far from being “socialist,” has more the features of a lukewarm liberalism. He does not propose to expropriate the multibillion-dollar healthcare industry and place it under workers’ control. Rather, he proposes higher taxes on the wealthy, leaving the source of their vast wealth untouched and allowing control over healthcare to remain in their hands.

Sanders entirely accepts the frameworks of the attacks against him and rejects all questions about the role of the trade unions. Sanders role in the elections is to bolster the Democratic Party, and he is also seeking to maintain the credibility and organizational stranglehold of the pro-capitalist and anti-working class trade unions.



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