

Sanders promotes union campaign at Amazon in Senate hearing on inequality

Tom Hall
18 March 2021

On Wednesday, the Senate Budget Committee, chaired by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, held a public hearing under the title, “The Income and Wealth Inequality Crisis in America.”

The hearing was part of the Democratic Party’s full-court press to support the unionization drive at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, which included an extraordinary public statement by President Joe Biden, who all but endorsed a “yes” vote for the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). Voting by workers will conclude on March 29 with the tally to be released the following day.

From the standpoint of the purported aim of the meeting, the most significant and moving testimony came from Jennifer Bates, a worker at the Bessemer facility, who described brutal working conditions and arbitrary discipline by management. “I started working at Amazon in May of 2020, not too long after they opened,” Bates said in her opening statement. “By my third day, I was hurting. I looked around and saw it wasn’t just me. I mentioned it to my sister who also worked there at the time, and she just told me it only gets worse.”

“My co-workers and I—older, younger, middle-aged people—limp from climbing up and down the stairs in the four-floor building,” she continued. “The work itself is also grueling... My workday feels like a 9-hour intense workout every day.”

“We, the workers, made the billions for Amazon—I often say, we are the billionaires—we just don’t get to spend it,” Bates concluded. She also described widespread intimidation by management in response to the union vote.

But while the hearing was billed as an investigation into the causes and consequences of the unprecedented levels of inequality in the United States, it amounted to a coverup of the real causes. A real investigation would have to examine the decades-long program of social counterrevolution conducted by the American ruling class with the full backing of both corporate-controlled parties.

The Democrats and Republicans have deliberately promoted policies since the mid-1970s aimed at ramping up exploitation and funneling trillions of dollars into the stock market. For this reason there was no discussion of the impact of last year’s

bipartisan multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street in the CARES Act, which was critical in further accelerating inequality by driving up share values while leaving tens of millions of American workers struggling to make basic living expenses.

Such dishonesty has long been a cardinal feature of public events and speeches on inequality by the Democratic Party’s “left” and “progressive” figures, Bernie Sanders above all. The Republicans on the committee were remarkably restrained in their remarks, given the fact that the Republican Congressional delegation has been furiously covering for an attempted coup d’état by Donald Trump, in which the supposed threat of “socialism” was a key ideological justification. This shows that they saw nothing to fear from the political grandstanding by the “democratic socialist” Sanders.

This contrasts sharply to the Democrats’ criticism of social media billionaires in hearings held over the last few years to promote the bogus narrative about Russian “meddling” in the US elections and promotion of “fake news.” Lindsay Graham, the ranking Republican of the Budget Committee, suggested in Wednesday’s hearing that going after social media monopolies such as Facebook and Twitter, which have been targeted by the extreme right for their supposed censorship of Trump and other right-wing figures, could be a source of “common ground” with the Democrats.

The farcical character was demonstrated above all in the refusal of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos to accept an invitation to attend. Since the Democrats took over the Senate in January, Sanders has chaired the Budget Committee, one of the most important committees of the Senate, and holds the power of subpoena. Sanders could have compelled Bezos to give testimony or face contempt of Congress.

Sanders lamented only in his opening remarks that it was “too bad” that the world’s richest human refused a summons by the United States Senate. His rhetorical attacks on Bezos, however, were nothing but hot air without the slightest proposals to seriously threaten his wealth.

Sanders used the hearing to promote his proposal for an “income inequality tax,” which would require corporations to pay additional taxes if their CEOs earn more than 50 times the wages of the company’s average worker. Sanders has pivoted

to this this paltry plan, which caps out at a mere 5 percent tax increase, after the Democrats torpedoed a \$15 per hour minimum wage proposal in its bailout package earlier this month.

The central claim given by Sanders and his Democratic colleagues was that the rise in income inequality over the past half century is the direct result in a decline in union membership. The solution to income inequality, Sanders argued, was for workers to join a union.

Sanders left it to expert witness Robert Reich, the former Labor Secretary under Bill Clinton, to flesh out this argument. In earlier decades, Reich declared, unions were a “countervailing force” to the power of American corporations. “That countervailing power is now gone.” With higher rates of union membership, Reich claimed, the AFL-CIO provided workers with not only economic but political power.

This presentation is an inversion of the actual role which the unions have played over the last four decades in worsening inequality. The AFL-CIO and other unions are not the victims of growing social inequality. They actively facilitated it, while their top executives benefited. Sanders and the Democrats promote the unions as bastions of “workers’ power” at the precise moment when the Biden administration is relying upon the teachers unions to force through school reopenings against overwhelming opposition from teachers and students.

Sanders and Reich both contrasted the fact that General Motors was the largest employer in America in the mid-1970s, and that the average autoworker at the time earned \$35 per hour adjusted for inflation, with the fact that low-wage retailer Wal-Mart is the largest employer today. “The difference is that GM workers had a union,” Reich claimed.

Both Reich and Sanders studiously avoided mentioning the *name* of that union, the United Auto Workers, which is under federal oversight after a massive bribery scandal led to the conviction of much of its top leadership for embezzlement and taking company bribes for signing pro-company contracts.

The United Auto Workers played the leading role in the conversion of the unions, in response to the impact of the end of the postwar boom and the growth of globalized production, into labor syndicates functioning as agents of management. In 1979, the UAW joined Chrysler’s board of directors at the invitation of then-CEO Lee Iacocca, and collaborated with the company to slash tens of thousands of jobs and close dozens of plants. By 1982, the UAW had enforced \$1.1 billion in concessions, amounting to \$10,000 per worker or \$36,227.82 in current dollars.

As for General Motors, the Obama administration, which included current president Joe Biden, handed the UAW billions in GM stock in 2009 in exchange for its assistance in the restructuring of the auto industry, slashing wages for new hires by half.

If Reich’s theory was correct, it would mean that the heavily-unionized US-based auto companies are still oases of relatively

decent wages and living conditions. Instead, conditions in the auto plants are little better than in Amazon. Today, most new hires at the Detroit automakers start out as temps earning only slightly more than Amazon workers, with substandard benefits and no contractual rights. Conditions for temps are so poor that in Detroit, auto plants are struggling to compete with Amazon for new hires.

The conditions during the pandemic are no better in the auto plants, either. Amazon, by the company’s own admission, has had at least 20,000 infections in its workforce since the start of the pandemic. No such public figures even exist in the auto industry, the result of a coverup of infections enforced with the support of the union. However, it is known that many autoworkers have died, including six at a single plant, Stellantis’ Warren Truck plant in suburban Detroit. The two-month shutdown of the auto industry last spring was the result of a wave of wildcat strikes in opposition to the UAW.

As for the RWDSU and its parent union, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), they have worked hand in glove with the meatpacking companies to keep plants open during the pandemic. The RWDSU kept 2,000 poultry workers on the job at a Camilla, Georgia Tyson plant after three workers died. In Waterloo, Iowa, the UFCW local at a Tyson pork plant even helped work out a perfect attendance bonus last spring, while management privately took bets on the number of workers who would become infected. And while Sanders claimed in Wednesday’s hearing that bringing in the unions would lead to higher wages, the RWDSU has explicitly refused to even raise such demands during the union vote at Bessemer.

In reality, the unions are not a “countervailing force” to “corporate power,” or else Biden would not be endorsing them. Rather, the Democrats, and even sections of the Republicans such as Marco Rubio, are promoting the unions because they see them as a crucial instrument of class rule. By imposing upon workers at Amazon the guardianship of the union, they are hoping to confine the opposition of workers within safe channels.

Whatever the outcome of the vote in Bessemer, workers at Amazon will need their own independent organization, whether they continue to face brutality from management alone or with the assistance of a union. The critical question is the development of the network of rank-and-file safety committees which have been built by Baltimore Amazon workers and in school districts and workplaces throughout the country.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact