

In wake of rejection of Deere sellout contract, Sanders’ “Labor Strikes Back” forum covers for union bureaucracy

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On Wednesday evening Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders convened an online forum titled “Labor Strikes Back,” ostensibly to discuss the strike wave in the United States, featuring former U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich and several union officials.

Held in the immediate aftermath of the rejection by striking workers at farm equipment maker John Deere of a sellout contract brought back by the United Auto Workers, the forum barely took notice of this development. There were only a few hundred viewers, reflecting the increasing isolation of Sanders, who at one time had a mass following, particularly among younger people and workers.

During the forum Sanders reprised his standard script, using bits of left-sounding demagoguery to cover up for the reactionary role Democratic Party and the trade unions. The alienation of millions of workers from the Democratic Party was on display this week in the crushing electoral setbacks Democrats suffered in Virginia and other states. At the same time, the revolt against the corporatist unions and growing militancy of the working class—shown by the Deere workers’ second rejection of a UAW-backed contract this week—is no more welcomed by Trump and the Republicans than Biden and the Democrats.

The lies and distortions presented by Sanders and other participants in the forum were numerous and would require more space than is available in this article take up. However, the essential lie presented at the forum, and advanced by all the participants, was that the unions are organizations that fight in the interests of the working class. However, to the extent that a massive strike wave is now expanding, including struggles at John Deere, Kellogg, Warrior Met Coal in Alabama, Buffalo nurses, ArcelorMittal steelworkers in Ohio, Scranton teachers and many other locations in the US and internationally, it has been in repudiation of sellout concessionary deals negotiated by the unions.

The forum took place in the context of the Biden administration’s effort to bolster the unions against the

threat of working-class militancy and in furtherance of the nationalist and militarist drive against China. To promote the unions Biden has sponsored the PRO Act (Protect the Right to Organize Act), primarily designed to shore up union treasuries while placing additional obstacles to strikes.

The five panelists included Sanders and Reich; Chris Laursen, former president of United Auto Workers Local 74 at the Deere plant in Ottumwa, Iowa; Trevor Bidelman, president of Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers’ International Union (BCTGM) Local 3-G in Battle Creek, Michigan; Melissa Piechowicz, a respiratory therapist at Mercy Hospital in Buffalo, where members of the Communications Workers of America are on strike; and Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants affiliated with the CWA.

The narrow, parochial view of the participants was revealed in the fact that no one mentioned a single strike or other event outside the United States despite a global wave of strikes and protests, including general strikes in India and other countries.

Perhaps the most honest and revealing remarks were made by Reich, who served under President Bill Clinton. Reich argued that the ruling class had to support the unions out of enlightened self-interest, the alternative being the uncontrollable growth of class struggles.

Affirming his loyalty to the ruling elite, Reich explicitly rejected any identification with the working class, declaring, “I am not a class warrior, I am a class worrier.” He declared, “I am afraid of the country coming apart at the seams,” referring to the danger posed to the ruling class by the uncontrolled reaction of workers to rampant inequality. Unions, along with certain mild reforms along the long discarded Scandinavian model, he later insisted, were vital to “discussions about whether capitalism can survive.”

However, even the paltry reforms championed by the likes of Sanders and Reich have been stripped out of Biden’s budget bill in the face of the implacable opposition by the

corporate interests that call the shots in the Democratic Party. That has not stopped Sanders from continuing to promote the budget bill as the “most progressive in history.”

Other panelists described, at times rather graphically, the appalling conditions that workers face: endless amounts of mandatory overtime, abysmal wages, constant fear of infection and death during the pandemic. All of this has been magnified under conditions of a global pandemic, that has killed over 750,000 in the US alone. No one, however, noted the obvious irony: The oppressive conditions behind the strike wave, including countless lives lost to COVID due to the homicidal reopening policies, were imposed with the collaboration of the very same unions the panel promoted as the supposed champions of workers.

Laursen, for example, explained that the conditions that sparked the rebellion by Deere workers, were created by a series of concessionary contracts imposed by the UAW going back to 1997, when the union agreed to the reactionary and divisive multi-tier wage and benefit structure. The strike only happened, however, when Deere workers voted down by a 90 percent margin a sellout contract brought back by UAW officials last month that maintained the tier structure and other concessions. An attempt by the UAW to end the strike was rebuffed this week when workers rejected a slightly modified version of the same sellout package by a 55 percent margin, a deal that Laursen supported.

In his remarks, Bidelman of the BCTGM at Kellogg’s in Battle Creek, Michigan restated the reactionary nationalist poison being spewed by the union bureaucracy, which is presenting the fight at Kellogg’s as a battle between US and Mexican workers over jobs. In a video interview published on Yahoo News in October, Bidelman launched a nationalist jab at Mexican workers declaring, “I mean, if you look at it, you’re told quite regularly not to drink the water in Mexico. So, I don’t know why you would want to eat the food that was made from that water.”

The most demagogic presentation was given by Nelson of the flight attendants, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America. Nelson was the only top-level union official invited by Sanders; a tacit recognition of the deep alienation felt by workers toward these organizations.

Nelson’s name was briefly floated as a possible replacement for former AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka who died last August.

In rambling and disjointed comments, Nelson referenced capitalism, general strike, Mother Jones and the 1934 Toledo Auto Lite strike, without mentioning any actual concrete struggle that workers are engaged in. At one point she denounced the “divide, delay, distract, demoralize—tactics of unionbusting,” the very tactics used by the trade union

bureaucracy to subvert and sabotage workers struggles.

Citing her own flight attendants union, Nelson later in the forum admitted, “[w]e are barely pushing forward from all the concessions post 9/11.” She then went on to blame workers themselves for this situation declaring, “We have let it slip back because we haven’t been willing to fight.” In fact, AFA and other airline unions have done the bidding of management, pushing concessions on a hostile rank and file in the name of “saving” jobs.

Not surprisingly at no point did anyone on the panel suggest the broadening or unification of the various struggles, a common set of demands or the joining together with workers globally. Moving to wrap up the discussion Sanders asked Nelson how workers could organize unions at their workplaces, to which the AFA chief fumbled around for a reply.

In the end all that Sanders and Reich could offer were pathetic calls for the passage of the PRO Act and the Freedom to Vote Act, toothless measures that the Democratic Party appears prepared to ditch.

The growth of strike struggles in the US and globally, after decades of suppression by the unions, is an event of world historic significance. Workers need organizations but not the rotten pro-capitalist unions. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Parties have spearheaded the fight for the building of rank-and-file committees independent of the unions to be the democratic and fighting voice of workers. To be successful, the counteroffensive against the assault of the ruling class on living standards must be politically independent of both capitalist parties and based on the international unity of the working class.

The working class is increasingly disgusted with the phony “political revolution” of Sanders, which has amounted to begging the ruling elites for a few crumbs while covering up for the Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street, the Pentagon and the affluent upper middle class layers, whose endless promotion of identity politics divides workers and has been a gift to Trump and his fascistic supporters.

The working class needs genuine revolutionary leadership to prepare the fight for workers’ power, the expropriation of the pandemic profiteers and other billionaires and multi-millionaires and the socialist reorganization of economic life in the US and internationally based on human needs not private profit. That is what the Socialist Equality Party is fighting for.



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