Bernie Sanders speaks at “Unity Fest” rally in Richmond, Virginia: A trap for Starbucks workers

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Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders spoke at Unity Fest, an event on Sunday, April 24, which was organized to celebrate the successful unionization vote at five Starbucks locations in Richmond, Virginia, by Starbucks United. The rally occurred in the midst of a nationwide drive by Starbucks United, an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), to organize coffee outlets across the United States, which began in Buffalo, New York, last December. Over the past months, workers at 27 locations have voted to join Starbucks United, with 200 more scheduled to vote in the following months.

Joining Sanders at the Unity Fest event was Marianne Williamson, former 2020 presidential primary candidate for the Democratic Party, mystic and author of *A Politics of Love*. Lynn Fox, the president of Workers United, the parent organization of Starbucks United was also present. Both Williamson and Fox spoke one on one with Starbucks organizers backstage.

The rally was advertised partly as a festival, with performances from 10 local bands and hundreds in attendance. In a social media post by the Richmond Democratic Socialists of America, attendees were invited to: “Come dance, chat, and celebrate with us at Unity Fest this Sunday 11am-8pm!” In alignment with the character of the top Democratic Party operatives and pseudo-left groups present, the level of carelessness in regards to COVID-19 was on full display at the rally, with many not wearing masks even as a new surge from the B.A.2 variant is ongoing.

The rank and file’s desire to fight back is serious and genuine. In seeking to unionize, Starbucks workers nationally are looking for a way to combat the intolerable conditions they face on the job, including understaffing, unpredictable scheduling and overwork. Also, with rising inflation nationally, workers are watching with unease as prices surge while their paychecks stay the same. But the organizers of the rally did not represent the rank and file of Starbucks employees.

Over the course of the union drive, Sanders and the Democratic Party as a whole have vocally supported Starbucks United. This was exemplified by the appearance of Williamson and tweets of support from Chuck Schumer, a devotee of the banks and economic nationalism.

The Democrats are also boosting the campaign by the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), which won a unionization vote at Amazon’s JFK8 fulfillment center in Staten Island, New York last month. Sanders flew in for the Starbucks rally just after appearing at an ALU rally in Staten Island, alongside New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, to boost the ALU in a second election next door at the LDJ5 warehouse. However, the wall-to-wall support by Democrats and union officials for the ALU succeeded only in alienating LDJ5 workers, who voted by a large margin to reject the ALU.

Last Thursday, President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and Labor Secretary Marty Walsh met with organizers from Starbucks United and the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) at a White House event to boost the unions.

The Biden administration has called itself “the most pro-union administration in the country's history.” In reality, this means that Biden, an experienced capitalist politician, seeks to use the services of the unions to suppress and strangle growing opposition in the

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working class to exploitation, social inequality and the ramp-up for world war against Russia.

Biden has set up a task force on “worker organizing and empowerment” that includes high-ranking military and financial officials, such as Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Treasury Secretary and former Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

In his speech Sunday, Sanders referenced the effects of the pandemic upon workers and the massive growth of the elite’s wealth. He said, “Starbucks’ profits increased by 31 percent last quarter. The owner of Starbucks, Howard Schultz, became nearly 1 billion dollars richer during the pandemic. Many thousands of workers died by the thousands, while the billionaires became much richer.”

He failed to note that Schultz reportedly would have been Hillary Clinton’s pick for Labor Secretary had she beat Donald Trump in 2016. After winning millions of votes from leftward moving workers and youth, Sanders gave his full-throated support to the warmonger and corporate shill Clinton, basically handing the election to Trump.

In his speech at the rally, Sanders said demagogically, “This is our demand right now: to tell Mr. Schultz and the people, stop the anti-union activity, stop bringing people into back rooms, stop threatening people, stop intimidating people. And equally important: start negotiating a first contract with those shops that have voted to form a union.”

But Sanders also voted for the CARES Act in March of 2020, which funneled trillions of dollars into the pockets of the oligarchs. His references to the million dead from the pandemic, which is not over, in the midst Biden’s “let it rip” pandemic policy and to a large crowd in at another super-spreader event was thoroughly hypocritical.

Starbucks United, which was formed last December with the vote in Buffalo, New York, is an affiliate of Workers United. Both unions are run by the Service Employees International (SEIU). Over the course of the pandemic, the SEIU has called off one strike after another by nursing home, hospital and other frontline workers and pushed through sellout contracts, which have kept wages below inflation, cut benefits and ignored workers’ demands.

In July 2021, the SEIU called off a strike by 1,500 Pennsylvania nursing home workers, who were prepared to fight against poor staffing and dangerous working conditions. More recently, they pushed through a sellout to end a month-long strike by hospital workers in Huntington, West Virginia, accepting a contract that differed little from the initial company proposal and imposed higher health care premiums.

As for Workers United, workers at Amcor were outraged when the union unilaterally imposed a contract, which workers voted down twice last July in Illinois. In a video explaining the debacle, Kathy Hanshew, Board Manager of the Chicago & Midwest Regional Joint Board (CMRJB) of Workers United, tyrannically explained to workers that they must abide by a new three-year agreement no matter what.

Workers need organizations to fight back, but they will not find it in Workers United and the official trade unions. Instead, in both union and nonunion shops, workers should form rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by the workers themselves and committed to fight for what workers need, not what the corporations, big business politicians and union bureaucrats say is affordable.

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