

Democratic Socialists of America scrambles to defend its role in imposing rail contract

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The Democratic Socialists of America has been thrown into crisis after three of its four members in the House of Representatives voted to impose a contract on the railroad workers, blocking a national rail strike. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Jamaal Bowman and Cori Bush all voted in favor of the bill, with only Rashida Tlaib voting against.

Together with Bernie Sanders in the Senate, the DSA-backed caucus introduced a separate resolution to give railroaders seven days paid sick leave. This was purely political theater to provide the Democrats with political cover. It had no chance of passing the Senate over opposition from Republicans and even right-wing Democrats such as Joe Manchin. And it was crafted in such a way that its passage in the House but rejection in the Senate would not even delay the signing of the anti-strike law.

In the Senate, Sanders cast a meaningless “no” vote against imposing the contract, but his support was critical for the expedited procedure through which it was passed, because under Senate rules it requires the support of all 100 senators.

The role of the DSA shocked and angered many of its own members, which include sincere but politically inexperienced youth who joined in the belief that the DSA was a genuinely socialist organization.

The DSA leadership, meanwhile, is in full damage control mode. The DSA Political Committee issued a statement Monday titled “Stand with Railworkers, Build Workers Power,” which was in reality wholly devoted to whitewashing the role of the DSA in illegalizing a strike by railroaders.

“We condemn the move by President Biden and Congress to force over 100,000 rail workers to accept the TA by denying them the legal right to strike,” the statement claimed. It added, “When every major power in the country—the center, the right, and our laws—aligned against workers, DSA members in Congress introduced a legislative push for sick days, and forced a vote on the measure, which did not succeed.”

After praising Rashida Tlaib’s vote against imposing the contract, the statement then adds in passing, several sentences down, “We disagree and are disappointed with the decision of DSA members Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rep. Cori Bush to needlessly vote to enforce the TA.”

The DSA is trying to cancel out public perception of its support for the anti-strike law by citing its support for adding seven sick days to the contract that Congress voted to impose. But even if this fig leaf had passed, it still would not have changed the fact that DSA members voted to strip workers of their democratic right to strike, which is a far more fundamental issue than sick days.

The DSA Political Committee statement tries to falsely separate the actions of Biden and the Democratic Party, of which it is a part, from the DSA. In reality, the DSA is a critical element of the Democrats’ attempts to keep workers and leftward moving youth trapped within the confines of this right-wing capitalist party. It is assisted in this role by a whole constellation of pseudo-left groups in and around the DSA, such as the *Labor Notes* publication, *Jacobin* magazine and others.

It has repeatedly come to the defense of the Biden administration and the Democratic Party against opposition from the left. In March of 2021, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez denounced left-wing criticism of Biden as a “privileged critique” by “bad faith actors.”

During this summer’s *Labor Notes* conference, leading DSA member and flight attendants union president Sara Nelson strenuously opposed suggestions by audience members that workers should break with the Democrats. “If we start seeing ourselves as a working class, then we don’t need a party,” she claimed. “The party [Democrats as well as Republicans] will come to us.” The vote by the DSA itself to impose the rail contract exposes this perspective as a self-serving falsehood.

Other DSA statements were more strident in their defense of the vote to legalize strike action, declaring all criticism as out of bounds and illegitimate. The DSA faction Socialist Majority instructed readers to “Stay Focused on the Class

Enemies” in a statement. The group’s leadership includes PC Chairwoman Kristian Hernandez.

“Several voices in DSA have recently called for DSA to censure or expel members of the ‘Squad’ who voted for the Congressional measure to impose the rail contract,” the statement acknowledges. “While we do not endorse their strategy of trading support for the TA that revokes rail workers’ right to strike for a vote on the sick days, we believe that directing DSA’s organizing energy in this moment only toward attacking closely-allied electeds [sic] is both a distraction from and counterproductive to the urgent tasks at hand.

“While we, as socialists, may have—and should express—criticisms of unions’ choice of strategy, we should make that criticism in the spirit of moving the struggle forward, not second-guessing past actions,” the statement concludes.

In other words, workers should not learn anything from the betrayals of “the past”—in this case, last week—but only “move forward”... to the next betrayal.

For the DSA, the “class enemy” does not include their own congresspeople who vote to strip workers of their right to strike. It does, however, include rank-and-file workers fighting against this dictatorial measure.

A statement by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee declaring Congress’s actions as “completely illegitimate” was widely shared on Twitter this weekend, where its declaration that “railroad workers reserve the right to organize and prepare collective action” received a particularly enthusiastic response.

The wide readership of the statement prompted a deluge of angry tweets from DSA members, including top DSA leadership, urging people to stop sharing it and slandering the RWRFC for its association with the *World Socialist Web Site*, where the statement was published. The RWRFC’s activity among railroad workers, which includes public meetings involving hundreds of railroaders and a series of nationwide informational pickets, has been amply documented.

David Duhalde, former DSA deputy director, wrote: “Isn’t it some WSWs front[?]” Another wrote: “Is this a formal statement from the union? No. Is it at least from actual rail workers? Not sure.” A third said: “When reading a Trotskyist mag like this, be alert to nuance. It isn’t as you wrote, the union that did something, it’s a ‘rank and file’ committee that even involves workers in other industries.” In other words, workers are not allowed to speak for themselves. Only union bureaucrats who played a central role in engineering the sellout contract are allowed to speak for them.

As a general rule, whenever the DSA enters into a serious

political crisis, its leadership responds with furious attacks on the *World Socialist Web Site*. Last year, dozens of leading DSA members responded to WSWs reporting of Ocasio-Cortez’s denunciation of criticisms of Biden by posting memes referencing the assassination of Leon Trotsky by a Stalinist agent. This was an implicit threat of violence that the DSA itself refused to condemn. The DSA is furious that the WSWs is being read by thousands of railroaders, who respect it as the only news outlet writing consistently from the side of railroaders and exposing the machinations of the government and the hated union bureaucracy.

Instead of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, the DSA is promoting Railroad Workers United (RWU), with which both it and *Labor Notes* have close connections. Its leadership consists primarily of lower-level union officials, and rather than campaigning to mobilize workers to fight against the bureaucracy, it is a union reform caucus claiming that the bureaucracy can be reformed from within by running opposition candidates.

Jacobin magazine, which functions as the house organ of the DSA, published an interview last Friday conducted by *Labor Notes* writer Jonah Furman with leading RWU member Ross Grooters, in which Grooters defended the role of the DSA in Congress. “Your average railroader is not paying attention to that... the [proposed] seven paid sick days [bill] is probably what’s being paid attention to the most,” he said. Grooters cynically claimed, “That’s a win. That took a lot of work from the same progressives who are coming under fire—people like Jamaal Bowman, who really stood up and were advocates for including the paid sick time. I think they need to be commended for that action.”

There are definite class interests motivating the DSA’s hostility to rank-and-file opposition. The DSA itself is a major constituency, not only of the Democratic Party, but within the union bureaucracy itself. It either controls or has lent crucial support to the leadership of many major unions. It supports the union apparatus not despite its role in policing the working class, but because of it.

This experience is an object lesson in the politics of the DSA and the rest of the pseudo-left. Their politics express the outlook of a privileged section of the middle class consumed with a struggle over privilege and positions. They are not socialist, but a branch of the Democratic Party that uses left-sounding phrase-mongering to provide the party with political cover even as it lurches further to the right.



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