

Poorly attended union rallies seek to rehabilitate Democrats after voting to impose rail contract

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On Tuesday, the two largest rail unions, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) and Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART-TD), held a series of rallies around the United States. Their aim was to rehabilitate the badly exposed image of the Democratic Party, above all, its pseudo-left “progressive” wing after it imposed a contract on railroaders and blocked a strike at the start of the month.

In an event advertised under the tagline, “Fight for workers’ rights,” the speakers’ list at the main rally in Washington D.C. was given over entirely to those individuals who played key roles in ripping up workers’ right to strike. This included congresspeople and Democratic Socialists of America members Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Jamaal Bowman and Cori Bush, who voted in favor of the anti-strike bill. Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, who cast meaningless votes against in the Senate but who supported the procedural maneuver that guaranteed the bill’s rapid passage also spoke.

In their remarks, they focused on the issue of sick days and pretended that Democrats would “continue the fight” to give workers seven days paid time off. But the failed resolution, which proposed to add sick days to the imposed contract, was designed from the start only to provide Democrats with political cover as they came together in record time with Republicans to ban a strike. Now, with Republicans set to take over the House next month, their “intransigence” will serve as a convenient excuse for why nothing can be done.

The rallies were very poorly attended, with no more than a couple dozen in many cities. At the main D.C. rally outside the Capitol building, an area which

regularly hosts protests in the tens and hundreds of thousands, a little more than 100 people turned out, consisting mostly of press, Democratic Party staffers and union officials, with perhaps a dozen actual railroaders. The low turnout is an expression of the deep hatred and distrust which workers regard the union bureaucracy.

A high turnout, however, was no doubt deliberately discouraged. A too-high ratio of rank-and-file workers to bureaucrats would have proven impossible to control. Hardly any of the speakers who appeared at the D.C. rally would have been able to speak before getting shouted down.

The rallies were held during the middle of the week in areas far removed from major railyards. There were no rallies held in the major centers of the rail industry, including Kansas City; Lincoln, Nebraska or even Chicago.

The rally in the metro Detroit area, for example, was held in a trendy middle class shopping area in Royal Oak, on the opposite side of the city from the large railyards in southwest Detroit. Workers were instructed not to speak with the press.

In D.C., congresspeople gave brief, boilerplate remarks and then left as fast as they could. Ocasio-Cortez pointed to a toothless letter to Biden by 70 members of Congress urging him to use executive action to give workers sick days. “We are going to use every single avenue possible [except allow strike action!] in order to secure paid sick days for our rail workers,” she claimed. This letter, which will lead nowhere, was referred to repeatedly by other speakers as “proof” of the ongoing support of Democrats for workers’ rights.

Jamaal Bowman, who introduced the sick days proposal in the House—framed as a separate resolution rather than an amendment to ensure that its inevitable rejection in the Senate would not delay the anti-strike law—called upon attendees to “pressure my colleagues, mostly Republicans.”

Rashida Tlaib, the only DSA member in the House who voted against the anti-strike law, declared, “The right to strike, I believe, is the single most powerful tool for our workers to fight injustice and corporate greed.” Unsurprisingly, she avoided mentioning that her fellow speakers and members of the pseudo-left DSA voted precisely to strip that tool from workers.

The DSA itself is in deep crisis over its role in imposing the contract. There are significant calls from within its own membership to expel the three DSA members who voted for the bill. A tweet by Ocasio-Cortez with a video of her remarks garnered mostly hostile responses. A reply by WSWS writer Nick Barrickman, who attended the D.C. rally, was “liked” more than 100 times.

The largest share of hot air, predictably, came from Sanders, who denounced “billionaires” and “Wall Street greed” without mentioning his own party’s role in enforcing the pro-corporate contract brokered by the Biden administration. “We’re going to continue to fight to guarantee paid medical leave,” Sanders claimed. “We are gonna put an end to Precision Scheduled Railroading.”

Sanders then stumped for himself in his new role as chair of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. Since his 2016 presidential primary campaign first pushed him into the national spotlight, the self-declared “democratic socialist” from Vermont has been elevated to high-ranking, sensitive positions by the Democratic Party, proof that he is seen as sufficiently responsible towards the interests of the same billionaires he rhetorically denounces. He currently chairs the Senate Budget Committee, where business has continued much as it had before, with the exception of a handful of public hearings which have given Sanders a platform to grandstand.

The imposition of the rail contract has come at a heavy cost for the Democratic Party and the union bureaucracy. Whatever authority they have left in the working class, after decades of imposing austerity, has been seriously damaged.

The day before Tuesday’s rally, rail engineers, furious over the unions’ role in trying to ram through the contract and buying Congress time to act, voted out BLET President Dennis Pierce in favor of a relatively unknown local officer, Eddie Hall—the only opposition candidate nominated for any position in the national leadership, the rest being “elected by acclamation” at the union’s Las Vegas convention earlier this year. Hall, however, is facing trumped-up disciplinary charges by the union for posting a WSWS article on the BLET election last month and may still be disqualified as a candidate.

The opposition of railroaders is also finding an independent outlet through the influence of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which held an online rally on December 6 that attracted over 400 registrants. Its latest statement, declaring Congress’s action illegitimate and that workers “reserve the right to organize and prepare collective action,” has received a wide audience. This has infuriated the leadership of the DSA, which denounced the statement on Twitter.

The pathetic attempts by the unions and the Democratic Party to put the genie back in the bottle will not succeed. Workers are already drawing significant conclusions from their role in the passage of the anti-strike law.



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