

Bernie Sanders, flanked by union bureaucrats, issues pathetic moral appeal to railroad CEOs in press conference

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15 February 2023

On February 9, Vermont Independent Senator Bernie Sanders held a live press conference on Twitter calling for paid sick days for American rail workers. The event was co-chaired by Indiana Republican Senator Mike Braun on behalf of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Senate Committee, and was flanked with representatives of the major railway unions.

The press conference was an attempt at damage control for the Democratic Party and the trade union apparatus, two months after a bipartisan vote in Congress to impose a contract which railroaders had rejected. The very individual grandstanding in the press conference as an advocate for railroaders played a central role in this attack on workers' basic democratic rights. Sanders orchestrated a maneuver to add seven paid sick days, which never had any chance of passing in the Senate over opposition from Republicans and right-wing Democrats, in order to give Democrats political cover as they voted nearly unanimously to impose the deal.

While Sanders did not vote to impose the contract, his support for the vote ensured its rapid passage, as opposition from even a single senator would have been enough to delay a vote under the expedited procedures being used by the Senate. However, three House members of the Democratic Socialists of America, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, voted in favor of the anti-strike law in the House.

As for the union bureaucracy, they acted as Congress' enablers. They ignored a 99 percent strike vote by workers and delayed voting as long as possible, in a bid to either ram through the deal against significant opposition or, failing that, to buy Congress time until after the November midterms to prepare their

intervention.

The coming together between self-declared "socialists" and right-wing Republicans was a major political exposure of what are in fact pro-capitalist politicians. They have spent much of the past two months in damage control mode, in a bid to rehabilitate their image. In mid-December, the unions sponsored a farcical "Fight for Workers' Rights" rally which was addressed by Sanders and the DSA members who had stripped workers of their rights.

Last week's press conference was cast in the same mold. Sanders claimed that the point of the event was to "send a strong message" to the CEOs of the rail industry that they "must guarantee" seven paid sick days to railroad workers. The self-declared democratic socialist Sanders began by mentioning the \$22 billion profit railroad companies made last year, noting that none was spent on improving the lives of railroaders.

"Did they spend it on making the rail industry safer? We just saw today the horrible accident in Ohio. No, they did not do that," he said, making a reference to the disastrous 50-train derailment in East Palestine last week resulting in an explosion of toxic fumes. This was the only reference to the massive disaster in the course of the event.

Sanders pointed to the "slashing" of the industry's workforce by 30 percent while leading CEOs made over \$175 million in compensation over three years. "CEOs making it out like bandits and workers are not getting one paid sick day... that does not make sense to me," claimed Sanders, who helped to defend this state of affairs in Congress.

Sanders then pivoted towards pathetic moral appeals for these same CEOs to grant sick days to workers. He

hailed in particular CSX's decision to give only four days paid sick leave to a fraction of its workforce, table scraps meant as a PR exercise which costs it virtually nothing. Sanders called on other railroads to follow in its footsteps and "do the right thing."

This recalls Sanders' reaction in 2018 to Jeff Bezos' decision to raise starting pay to \$15 per hour for Amazon warehouse workers. Even though this was paired with a cutting of bonuses, stock options and productivity incentives which made the move virtually cost-neutral, Sanders acted as Bezos' PR man, even shielding him from criticism that the pay decision was a meaningless stunt.

Others on the podium echoed Sanders' toothless moral appeals. Tony Cardwell, President of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED), praised not only Sanders but also the "courage" of CSX's CEO Joseph Hinrichs for being "willing to step out and do something for his workers." Senator Mike Braun, a businessman worth between \$35 million and \$95 million, was given space to boast of his own treatment of his employees. He suggested the railroads treat "your employees like family," while hoping the issue "solves itself through the network of common sense."

"Common sense" from the railroads' point of view is to press their advantage and violate even the terms of the pro-corporate contract, secure in the knowledge that Washington and the union apparatus have their backs. This is exactly what they have done: Three railroads have introduced pilot programs for one-man rail crews, and BNSF is outsourcing locomotive maintenance to outside contractors. These were never mentioned throughout last week's press conference.

In addition to the BMWED, union officials from the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET), the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen (BRS), and the AFL-CIO, SMART's Transportation Division (SMART-TD) took turns praising Sanders and blandly calling for unity and "hope." Interestingly, the BLET was not represented by new president Eddie Hall, who unseated Dennis Pierce in a huge upset motivated by rank-and-file anger over the latter's role in imposing the deal.

Jeremy Ferguson, the President of SMART-TD, engaged in a falsification of the history of the past six months. He claimed that Congress had acted, not to ban

a strike which workers were pushing for, but to break an impasse caused by the railroads. "I had front-row seat at that impasse ... first in September and then late November." As a matter of fact, Ferguson was not merely an audience member but a key actor in the sellout, even falsely claiming to workers that the "US Constitution" prohibited them from striking.

Earlier this year, Ferguson openly defended the intervention of Congress and the White House, claiming in an interview that Biden "had to put the country first and the economy first."

Sanders' loyalty is being rewarded by being repeatedly elevated within the Democratic Party's hierarchy. Having previously been given the chair of the powerful Senate Budget Committee, Sanders will now helm the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, it was recently reported.

This takes place even after the Democratic Party leadership voted for a Republican resolution in the House denouncing socialism and the redistribution of wealth. This apparent contradiction is because Sanders, as well as the DSA, have nothing to do with socialism. Their role is to capture and defuse left wing and anti-capitalist sentiment before it escapes the control of the two-party system.

Real socialism requires the break by the working class with all of the capitalist parties and its "left" agencies. This is precisely what Sanders is desperate to avoid at all costs.



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