

Bernie Sanders blames rail workers for Ohio rail disaster, defends strikebreaking Biden administration

Shannon Jones
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Sometimes a politician sums up the real essence of their politics in a few glib words. This was the case with Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders when confronted by MSNBC columnist Eric Michael Garcia last week about the role of Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg in the toxic train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio.

After more than a week-long silence on the rail disaster, Buttigieg appeared in an interview last week when he complacently waved off the significance of the derailment by citing the fact that more than 1,000 derailments occur every year in the United States. After a sharp public backlash, Buttigieg was forced to walk this back somewhat by issuing a stern-sounding but toothless letter to Norfolk Southern. He still has not visited the disaster site, vaguely claiming he will only do so “when the time is right.”

Sanders’ five-word reply to Garcia’s question—“Did he drive the train?”—encapsulates the cynical arrogance and hostility to the working class of this self-identified “democratic socialist.”

Sanders’ statement not only absolved Buttigieg and the Biden administration, but his own responsibility for the disaster. He played a key role in the maneuvering which led to the passage of an anti-strike law against railroaders last December. His statement also implicitly blamed the rail crew, a disgusting slander in light of the unsafe condition of the rail system that the Democrats and Republicans, including Sanders, have created through their kowtowing to the massively profitable rail corporations.

What are the facts? A Norfolk Southern train carrying vinyl chloride and other highly toxic chemicals derailed after safety equipment failed to detect in time an

overheated wheel bearing. This under conditions where the jobs of workers responsible for monitoring such situations had been eliminated by the railroad as a cost saving move. Norfolk Southern did not even report the train was carrying high hazard materials due to lax or non-existent regulations.

Sanders’ comments to Garcia were not accidental. They flow logically from his role as a leading figure in the Democratic Party and as a “left” apologist for the pro company unions.

Nearly a week after the Ohio rail disaster, Sanders had staged a press conference with union officials to hail the granting of four additional sick days to certain categories of rail workers by CSX. Flanked by right-wing Indiana Republican Senator Mike Braun and heads of rail unions, Sanders praised the company’s “responsibility,” while only mentioning in passing the toxic poisoning of East Palestine.

Those extra sick days, which do not include train crews that are worked to the bone and are on call 24/7 under “Precision Scheduled Railroading,” amounted to a token gesture to cover for the fact that the railroads are pressing the advantage Congress gave them with the anti-strike law. Three railroads announced “pilot programs” for one-man crews only days after the strike bill was signed into law, and BNSF has since announced plans to contract out locomotive maintenance to non-union labor.

Earlier, Sanders had played a key role in the passage of the Biden administration’s strikebreaking bill imposing management-dictated contract terms on the backs of 120,000 rail workers that did nothing to address workers’ needs or mitigate unsafe conditions. Railroaders had repeatedly warned that overwork and

understaffing were creating conditions ripe for disaster. This was the major reason why workers voted by 99 percent to strike in the first place.

While Sanders voted against the final version of the strike ban and the contract imposed by the Biden administration on rail workers, he played a critical role in its enactment. Sanders helped craft a sham amendment to the bill that added seven paid sick days, itself inadequate. It was known in advance that it had no chance of passing in the Senate, where it would have to overcome a Republican filibuster. The purpose of the amendment was to provide political cover to himself and other “progressives.”

The bill was deliberately structured in such a way that the inevitable failure of the sick leave proposal in the Senate would not delay its enactment in any way.

Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez and other members of the Democratic Socialists of America in the then-Democratic-controlled House voted for the strikebreaking bill under the pretext of supporting the provision of additional sick days. The most significant element of the vote in the Senate was the expedited process, requiring unanimous consent by all 100 Senators, that rushed the legislation through ahead of the strike deadline. The deal had been worked out in advance with the White House and Sanders had agreed to it. If Sanders had objected, the bill would have been delayed.

Sanders has long ago been elevated into a top figure in the Democratic Party. From a nominally independent, “left” sounding apologist for the party on the margins of the Senate, Sanders is now one of the party’s leading figures. In January, Sanders was given the chair of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. This was after a two-year term as chair of the powerful Senate Budget Committee. Ocasio-Cortez, meanwhile, got tapped to the number two position on the House Oversight Committee.

The elevation of Sanders and the DSA comes even as the Democratic House leaders voted earlier this year for a Republican-sponsored bill denouncing socialism.

There is nothing inconsistent in this. Sanders is not a socialist, but a capitalist politician, a leading figure in the Democratic Party, who uses occasional “left” phrases to dupe workers and shore up the position of the right-wing trade union apparatus and the capitalist state as a whole. His disgraceful comments on the East

Palestine disaster are just one more confirmation of this.



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