

Transportation Secretary Buttigieg visits East Palestine for photo-op, as more details emerge of derailment and its aftermath

Tom Hall
23 February 2023

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg visited East Palestine, Ohio, on Thursday for a press conference and photo-op. The trip followed a similar visit by ex-President Donald Trump on Wednesday.

Both were the latest in a series of visits by prominent politicians. Common to all of these have been their empty platitudes and patronizing of residents for their “resilience” and claiming vague support, while using the opportunity to engage in mutual finger-pointing, each party using the other’s record of complete indifference in order to cover up their own responsibility.

This was continued in Buttigieg’s visit. “I want [residents] them to know they’re not alone. That before, during and after the national attention, they’re going to have support. They’re going to have support from us when it comes to holding Norfolk Southern accountable,” Buttigieg claimed. In fact, Buttigieg made no statements on the disaster for nearly two weeks. The first press release on the subject on the Department of Transportation’s website was published on Tuesday, February 21, 18 days after the disaster.

In an interview last Friday, Buttigieg cavalierly dismissed the significance of the derailment, suggesting that it was receiving outsized media attention, by citing the fact that more than 1,000 derailments occur every year in the US. This manifest indifference on the part of the Biden administration ceded ground to Trump and the extreme right, who themselves are trying to politically exploit the disaster, with Trump subsequently announcing his visit to East Palestine.

Buttigieg was forced to partially reverse course after a subsequent outcry over his remarks. Earlier this week, he issued a public letter chastising Norfolk Southern while “calling on” railroads—that is, asking them—to implement voluntarily various piecemeal measures. The Environmental Protection Agency has also taken over the official cleanup from Norfolk Southern, which has also been compelled to announce it will temporarily close down the tracks involved in the derailment and remove, rather than “remediate” as originally planned, the surrounding soil.

The Biden administration, in turn, is now using Trump’s record of deregulating the rail industry during his term in office in order to deflect attention from its own record. Buttigieg accused Trump of playing “political games” during his visit. This was followed up by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, who accused Republicans

of “bad faith attacks” on Buttigieg, while pointing out that Democrats never called for Trump’s Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao to be fired after similar disasters.

This says more than perhaps Jean-Pierre intended. Chao is a wealthy arch-reactionary, who was embroiled in a scandal that she had improperly used her position to benefit her family’s billion-dollar shipping business and later parlayed her time in Washington into a spot on the corporate board of grocery store giant Kroger. That Democrats were content to allow Chao, who is also Asian American, to stay in her cabinet post is a demonstration of their own pro-corporate politics and their endless desire for bipartisan collaboration, since Chao is the wife of Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell.

In reality, both parties bear responsibility for the disaster, having both supported decades of deregulation and backing rail profits to the hilt. Indeed, both parties received campaign contributions from the railroads, including \$725,000 from Norfolk Southern in 2022, split 51-49 in favor of the Democrats.

Only three months ago, both parties came together to pass a bipartisan law to ban 120,000 railroaders from striking and impose a pro-company contract crafted by the Biden administration. The central issues which workers wanted to strike over were severe understaffing, overwork and other profit-driven policies which have eroded safety standards on the railroads.

As Biden was preparing with Congress to ban strike action, Buttigieg held a private meeting with Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw and the company’s chief legal counsel. The meeting, according to a post by Shaw on LinkedIn, focused on the “essential role the people of Norfolk Southern Corporation play moving the U.S. economy.” Given the context in which the meeting took place, this could have only been a euphemism for a discussion urging the White House to take action to block a strike.

Meanwhile, anger continues to mount among local residents, who confronted Shaw in a town hall sponsored by CNN. “I don’t feel safe in this town now. You took it away from me,” one person declared. “Did you shorten my life now? I want to retire and enjoy it. How are we going to enjoy it? You burned me. You’ve made me an angry man.”

A broad turnout is expected today at another town hall in East Palestine hosted by celebrated environmental attorney Erin Brockovich, which will also be addressed by residents from Flint,

Michigan, where the water supply was contaminated with lead.

Residents are also reporting difficulty receiving proper medical treatment. One mother told CNN about her experience taking her son to their pediatrician for health problems after returning home from the evacuation. “I was told they had no guidance from the CDC, the health department—there was nothing they could do.”

An East Palestine resident spoke to the WWSWS about her frustrating experience with a local health clinic set up by the county government. “When I went, I talked to a very nice nurse, who simply sat across from a table and collected data with her laptop. That was all. No offer of blood work, or any other actual type of medical care. She did say they will be here for a while, although I did not find that very comforting.

“She asked if we needed a referral from our PCP (primary care physician). I asked referral for what? Basically, just to show that we were there. I told her I would like one. But she said we do not have printers, so we will have to email them to you. ... I said, can I please have a phone number to call in case I do not receive it? That’s a good question, I was told, because they don’t have one. I guess you would just call the Columbiana County health department.”

More details emerge on accident, cover-up

More information is coming out about the initial cover-up of the disaster’s potential impact on the area’s drinking water. Ohio Governor Mike DeWine’s claim last Wednesday that the drinking water in the area was safe was based on sampling conducted by a Norfolk Southern contractor, according to a report in the *Huffington Post*. Third-party experts who spoke with the web publication have pointed to serious irregularities in this testing, including the existence of large air bubbles in multiple samples and high acidity in others which would have impacted the results.

One of the chemicals for which detection would have been impacted is butyl acrylate, which is known to have seeped into the Ohio River, prompting officials in Cincinnati more than 300 miles away to shut off intake from the river to the city’s water supply.

The Ohio EPA also conducted its own tests, whose preliminary results were reached hours after DeWitt claimed the water was safe, the *Huffington Post* reported. Those results have still not been released to the public.

Also on Thursday, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) released the preliminary findings of its investigation into the causes of the derailment. The release focused in particular on the overheated axle on the first car to derail, the 23rd out of 150 on the train. The NTSB report looked at temperature readings from track-based heat sensors, also called wayside defect detectors or hot bearing detectors (HBDs), positioned at several mile intervals on the tracks.

They found that the temperature readings rose steadily over the last 30 miles before the derailment, from 30 degrees above normal when passing by the first HBD, to 103 degrees on the second, to 253 degrees above normal over the last detector. According to

Norfolk Southern’s internal standards, only a temperature of 115 above normal requires the train to be stopped and inspected.

This last reading triggered an audible alarm in the locomotive, and the crew applied breaks in an attempt to stop the train. However, the overheated axle by this time had failed, and the 23rd car derailed, bringing several cars with it. Crews identified smoke and fire coming from the train and notified dispatchers of a possible derailment. The report effectively absolves the train crew itself of any responsibility for the accident, given that they acted promptly and within company regulations and that nothing could have been done to prevent the disaster by the time the first alarm sounded.

However, the preliminary report leaves many unanswered questions, including: Why did the train not stop 20 miles further back, where eyewitness footage caught the train axle in question already on fire? What role did Norfolk Southern’s corporate policy, including one which allows dispatchers to instruct crews to ignore warnings from HBDs and which led to an earlier derailment last year, play in the disaster? The report also does not address questions around the cleanup effort, including the highly contested decision to carry out a release and burn of one of the cars.

Many of these questions will be addressed in the final report, the NTSB says. But without a doubt, the largely self-regulated character of the rail industry itself played a significant role in allowing such a disaster to take place. Even the existence of an NTSB investigation is unusual, given that the agency normally does not even investigate non-fatal rail accidents. And whatever the findings reveal, the response will be a whitewash by the government, which seeks to shield Norfolk Southern from as much responsibility as possible, as with countless such investigations in the past.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact