

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Railroad Workers United pass blame for strike ban onto each other

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In an April 11 interview in *Jacobin* magazine, the de facto house organ of the Democratic Socialists of America, DSA congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tried to defend her vote to ban a strike on the railroads by absurdly claiming that “rank-and-file” railroaders had asked her to do so.

Ocasio-Cortez and two other DSA members in the House of Representatives voted in December to impose a contract that railroad workers had already voted to reject. This was a major self-exposure that sparked outrage and damaged the credibility of the DSA, which functions as a faction inside the Democratic Party. Railroaders wanted to fight against brutal scheduling systems, pay that failed to keep pace with inflation and unsafe working conditions caused by relentless cost-cutting, in an industry where more than 1,100 derailments take place every year.

The three DSA members did not only vote in favor of the bill, but, together with Bernie Sanders in the Senate, crafted the cynical maneuver by the Democrats to try to cover their tracks. They paired the anti-strike law with a vote to add a desultory seven days of paid sick leave. They knew from the start this would never pass opposition from Republicans and right-wing Democrats in the Senate, so the vote was deliberately structured to ensure that this would not delay the anti-strike law.

This is why *Jacobin* opened its pages to Ocasio-Cortez to try to refurbish her image. The interview is headlined “AOC: The Biden Administration’s Rightward Turn Is ‘a Profound Miscalculation.’” But this is absurd because Ocasio-Cortez herself voted for this “rightward turn.” Moreover, the interview was conducted by David Sirota, a longtime Democratic Party campaign strategist who now serves on *Jacobin*’s editorial board. In other words, both sides of the interview table expressed the deep integration of the DSA with the top levels of the Democratic Party’s apparatus.

Sirota, compelled to acknowledge the elephant in the room, asked Ocasio-Cortez: “[You] have voted 91 percent of the time with the Biden administration. That includes votes on the railworkers’ strike, spending \$40 billion on the Ukraine war, and billions of dollars for microchip companies that have been criticized for using the cash to do buybacks. You and a group of progressives also didn’t withhold your vote on the American Rescue Plan when the Biden administration abandoned the minimum wage.”

Having destroyed in three sentences the entire premise of the interview, that Ocasio-Cortez and the DSA are opponents of the Biden administration’s policies, he then immediately turned to cover his tracks, asking: “How can you hold your party accountable or create

that boundary with the Biden administration when you and progressives in the Congress are oftentimes voting for what the party leadership wants, and very rarely—sometimes, but rarely—holding out your vote when the party really needs it?”

In the course of her answer, Ocasio-Cortez said the following: “When it comes to the rail vote, for example, we worked very closely with all elements of the railworkers; not just the Teamsters, not just some of the other formal unions, but also those members of the unions that were rebelling against the initial round of agreements. It was in tandem with these organizations, RWU [Railroad Workers United] and some of those folks that were leading the fight on opposing that initial agreement to a terrible contract. Those were the folks that we were working with in developing our organizing strategy around this.

“It was following the actual railworkers’ lead in both camps. This was not just about traditional union leadership, but also rank-and-file grassroots leadership that we tried to determine our strategy with.”

Having blamed railroaders themselves for telling her to ban their own strike, she then turned immediately toward denouncing those who equate “difference in strategy with a 180-degree change in commitment to our vision and our principles.”

“There is so much money and so much interest invested in sowing chaos on the Left,” she said. “We have to realize that the same tools that are good for us, and the way that we can use the internet to bypass some of the traditional structures that have gate-kept our media, gate-kept our political organizing, etc.—these are still algorithms owned by billionaires who want to incentivize internal conflict. And they do. I believe there are times when we have fallen for it.”

The implication is that principled left-wing opposition to the DSA’s votes in favor of the interests of billionaires is the product of manipulation by billionaires. This is an absurd, self-contradictory slander. It is aimed above all at the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has consistently exposed the politics of the DSA in order to fight for genuine, revolutionary socialism, through the political independence of the working class from both big business parties.

The difference between genuine socialism and the DSA is not simply a “difference in strategy” but a difference in the classes that they represent. Real socialism is based on the struggle of the working class against oppression and exploitation. The DSA, meanwhile, uses left-sounding phrases to cover up its defense of oppression and exploitation.

The claim that “grassroots leadership” against the contract was led by Railroad Workers United is false. In reality, RWU is a faction within the bureaucracy with ties to the DSA and to the *Labor Notes*

publication. Real “grassroots” leadership was provided by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which organized informational pickets, held online meetings with hundreds of attendees and published many statements providing workers with a strategy and perspective on which to fight. It repeatedly warned workers that Congress would try to intervene to block their strike, and that this could only be fought by workers organizing independently of the union bureaucracy, which was working with the White House to try to ram through the deal.

RWU, meanwhile, upheld the authority of the union bureaucracy and tried to confine workers to “exerting pressure” by voting against the contract. This, they claimed, would force union negotiators to go back and bargain for a better deal. Instead, the pro-company union bureaucracy delayed the process for weeks to buy Congress time and enable them to ban the strike. The WWS is not able to confirm whether, in addition, the RWU directly advised Ocasio-Cortez and the DSA to vote to ban the strike. But it would not be out of keeping with the activities of this organization as a whole throughout the contract fight.

Ocasio-Cortez’s allegation produced a crisis within RWU. Four days after the interview was published, RWU leader Ron Kaminkow published a separate article in *Jacobin* denying her claim.

But in denying Ocasio-Cortez’s claim, Kaminkow adds that the RWU *did* support the vote on sick days: “RWU was and is in favor of any legislation that would grant any relief to the barbaric working conditions we contend with—but we would never concede our right to strike. We thank Ocasio-Cortez and other members of the House of Representatives and the Senate for their votes in support of sick leave. But we are not happy at all with her or others in both chambers who voted to deny railroad workers the right to strike.”

This is splitting hairs. Kaminkow claims they opposed the vote to impose the contract, but that they supported the vote to add sick days to the very same contract which was being imposed. One can obviously not have one without the other. Moreover, an organization representing the interests of the rank and file would be duty-bound to expose the sick days proposal as cynical sleight of hand, not helping Democrats to pull the wool over workers’ eyes—and then, even four months later, thanking them for their “support”!

In fact, RWU was shifting into damage-control mode for the DSA almost immediately following the vote. On December 2, three days after the vote in the Senate, RWU leader Ross Grooters was interviewed by *Jacobin*, where he claimed, “Your average railroader is not paying attention to [the vote by the DSA to ban the strike] ... the [proposed] seven paid sick days [bill] is probably what’s being paid attention to the most.” He then praised the DSA for their “support” for sick days, adding: “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 was no hint in that interview that RWU was “not happy” with the DSA for voting to ban a strike, as Kaminkow now claims. “I understand the frustration [among railroaders],” Grooters concluded. “But my frustration is not with the politicians who voted to implement this thing, it’s with the process itself. I don’t blame Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, for instance, for voting yes for it. I understand the strong feelings about it because I don’t disagree—it is strike breaking, and it is an unfair labor practice, but that is the process; we sort of knew that going in.”

At the same time as Grooters was treating Ocasio-Cortez with

“understanding,” he denounced a statement by the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee which called the strike ban “completely illegitimate.” Grooters tweeted: “I discount any article, especially those about the railroads, not containing a byline. I can’t organize with people who can’t be reliably placed. There are no shortcuts.”

Both the DSA and “reform” caucuses like RWU are being called upon to play critical roles in blocking a movement of the working class which escapes the control of the ruling class. Various union “reform” groups with ties to the DSA are being elevated to top leadership positions. This includes RWU’s sister organization Teamsters for a Democratic Union, which forms a key constituency for current union president Sean O’ Brien.

In the United Auto Workers, Unite All Workers for Democracy have entered into the union’s top leadership for the first time, following an election where hundreds of thousands of workers were prevented from voting. The DSA, meanwhile, is being brought into responsible positions in the Democratic Party’s hierarchy. The new mayor-elect for Chicago, the nation’s third-largest city, was elected with key DSA support.

But the Democratic Party and union bureaucracies are moving to the right, not the left. They are preparing for a showdown with the working class over massive cuts to social spending, wages and jobs in order to pay for trillions in bank bailouts and military spending. In particular, the ruling class looks at the contracts at UPS and the auto industry later this year as being particularly dangerous flashpoints. They need the DSA and its associated union factions to disorient and confuse opposition in the rank-and-file.

Workers must draw the necessary conclusions from this. They need a genuinely independent program, and organizations which they genuinely control, in order to fight against the gang-up against them by the government, the corporations and the union bureaucracy. That means also taking the measure of the DSA and union “reform” factions like RWU.



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