

Bernie Sanders holds Senate hearing to prop up union bureaucracy

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The US Senate's Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee, chaired by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, held a hearing Tuesday morning with a number of top US union bureaucrats.

There was an obvious contradiction between the title of hearing, "Standing Up Against Corporate Greed: How Unions are Improving the Lives of Working Families," and the fact that it was being held by a committee of the Senate, a body of multimillionaires—including Sanders, the so-called "democratic socialist." In fact, if the hearing had given an honest picture of reality, it would have been titled, "How union bureaucrats are helping corporations cut wages and lay off workers." But this was exactly the reality the hearing tried to cover up.

Significantly, the hearing took place the same day as a "March for Israel" rally in Washington D.C., which received significant media coverage but attracted only a fraction of the 300,000 who took part in a D.C. march against Israeli genocide in the Gaza Strip earlier this month. The massive scale of opposition to Israel's massacre of Palestinian civilians has revealed how much the entire political establishment is isolated from and hated by the population.

Sanders and other "lefts" in the Democratic Party, including the Democratic Socialists for America, who were exposed last year by their support for the strike ban against railroaders, have been further discredited by their support for Israel. The greatest fear in ruling circles is that this growing anti-war movement might link up with the growing ferment in the working class, under conditions where the political establishment and the trade union bureaucracy are increasingly losing control of the situation.

Much is riding on the continued credibility of the three union officials invited to appear: Shawn Fain of the United Auto Workers, Sean O'Brien of the Teamsters and Sara Nelson of the flight attendants' union. All three are members of the AFL-CIO's Executive Council, which issued a statement last month backing Israel and which is trying to clamp down on anti-war statements by the rank and file.

These three officials have been promoted as supposed firebrand militants, in order to answer the growing danger of a rank-and-file rebellion against the two-party system and the union bureaucracy. They have received crucial support from the

Democratic Party, especially through the Democratic Socialists of America, which backed Fain and O'Brien's elections campaigns, and of which Nelson is a member.

All three of them make regular visits to the White House to meet with Biden, who hopes to use the bureaucracy's services to enforce "labor peace" at home while it prepares for world war. Last week, Biden also appeared at a rally in support of the new tentative agreements in the auto industry, an event which drew significant counter-demonstrations over Biden's support for the Israeli genocide. Biden and Fain appeared in front of a banner which instructed autoworkers to go "back to work."

These bureaucrats' own roles in blocking or betraying strikes and enforcing sellout contracts have left them increasingly discredited.

Written statements submitted beforehand and testimony given to the Committee in-person were designed to whitewash this record. Fain's statement presented the union's "stand-up strike"—which impacted only a small fraction of the automakers' production—and the new tentative agreements at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis (formerly Fiat Chrysler) as "[turning] the tide in [the] class war for the American worker."

In reality, the contracts fall far below workers' demands. Many of the claims about it made by the bureaucracy, such as that they will provide for the hiring in of temps at full time, have been exposed as lies. Displaying contempt for the opinions of workers, the statement does not even suggest that workers still have to vote to approve them, much less acknowledge widespread opposition. The same day as Fain's appearance in the Senate, workers at GM's Lansing Delta Township plant voted down the contract, potentially "turning the tide in the class war" against the deal at GM.

In a particularly significant passage, Fain warned, "**Elected leaders [must] understand that economic justice is a national security risk for all of us if people don't have it, feel it.** [bold in the original]" In plain language, Fain was warning the Senate of the danger of a social revolution in the United States and offering his services to help prevent it.

O'Brien's statement made similar claims about the contract rammed through earlier this year at UPS after a fake "strike ready campaign." That contract contained limited wage increases for part-timers, which barely keep pace with pay at

non-union Amazon, froze increases in the company's pension contributions in many regions of the country and left the vast majority of delivery drivers without air conditioning. In the aftermath of the contract, which was passed under dubious circumstances, UPS has begun eliminating many full time positions. O'Brien also played a key role in buying Sanders and the rest of Congress time to ban the railroad strike last year.

Sara Nelson combined the most radical-sounding, tub-thumping demagoguery with the most open and craven support for corporate America. Her interminable 16-page written statement began with denunciations of "capitalist economy" and extensive references to Mother Jones, the Ludlow Massacre and the violent labor struggles of the early 20th century. It then suddenly pivoted toward an extended personal account of September 11th terror attacks.

Nelson ended by hailing the Association of Flight Attendants's role in securing tens of billions of dollars in bailout money for the airlines under the CARES Act in 2020. "Because we have a long history, and because of the unprecedented crisis, they [the airline executives] were willing to hear me out. Together, we walked into Congress to pitch our plan," she bragged, thanking in particular Sanders for his role in the legislation.

The thrust of Nelson's statement was that the struggle of workers, side-by-side with a noble, enlightened Congress, secured legislation over the course of the 20th century to improve pay and working conditions, only to be eroded since the 1980s by Republicans. Incredibly, one of the examples she cited was the Railway Labor Act, which she claimed "for [decades] provided workers with the ability to threaten or carry out the right to strike in order to come to an agreement." In reality it all but bans strikes in the railroads and airline industries.

Nelson's testimony also contained the only suggestion that the record of the union apparatus has been anything other than stellar, when she said that the pursuit of "labor peace ... led to corruption and compromise that often left workers unable to tell the difference between the corporate c-suite and the union leadership." But this is just as much an indictment of Nelson herself as well as the bureaucracy as a whole.

The hearing itself mostly consisted of the union officials and the Democratic members of the committee slapping each other on the back, demonstrating the close integration of the bureaucracy with capitalist politics.

At the same time, the officials reassured the Senate that their occasional rhetoric did not imply any opposition to capitalism. "I just want to be clear, not all of our relationships that we have with our employers is adversarial," O'Brien declared. "We work day and night to create opportunities to ensure that these companies can be successful ... we work with our partners to make sure we fulfill the needs of the country and keep supply chains moving."

Fain concurred, adding later on in the hearing, "Contrary to

the 'thug' label that some people put on us, I want to be clear about this, we want businesses to succeed ... but we're not going to let it succeed at the expense of the workers."

In reality, it is precisely the decades-long assistance of the UAW in slashing hundreds of thousands of jobs, closing dozens of plants and reducing wages to levels not seen since before the 1930s that has assured the auto companies have made record profits. The UAW apparatus' deep integration with management was exposed by the corruption scandal which uncovered millions in bribes and which brought down two former union presidents.

Fain was then allowed to claim that the auto contracts were the product of a "grassroots" effort, and that under his presidency "the members run this union now." In fact, Fain was "elected" on a turnout of 9 percent, in which hundreds of thousands never even received ballots. Socialist autoworker Will Lehman, who ran for president on a campaign of abolishing the bureaucracy, has filed a suit demanding the election be re-run. The contract vote itself has been no more "democratic," with implausibly high "yes" votes having been announced at several Detroit-area plants.

Nelson, in response to a question from Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisconsin) about how companies could be made to see union labor as an "asset," went so far as to complain that well-meaning corporate executives were being hamstrung by shareholders. "Even the best CEOs that I have worked with who have wanted to run a very good company have been forced ... they are no longer the decision-makers. They are driven to send more and more money to Wall Street rather than investing in the company, investing in the workers..."

One outburst during the hearing also revealed the debased level of capitalist politics in the United States, when Markwayne Mullin (R-OK), outraged over a series of tweets O'Brien had made against him, stood up and challenged him to a fist-fight "for charity."

The union bureaucracy is not "standing up to corporate greed" or they would not be promoted by the Democratic Party. Rather, they are a crucial instrument of class rule which they hope, vainly, can bring workers back into line.



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