

More than a year after toxic train derailment, Biden visits East Palestine, Ohio to praise government response

Jacob Crosse
16 February 2024

More than a year after thousands of people and animals in East Palestine, Ohio, and the surrounding area were poisoned following last year's toxic train derailment, President Joe Biden made his first in-person appearance in the rural community.

Despite promising to visit the village of 4,700 working class residents following the derailment and subsequent “controlled burn” of five tankers worth of the cancer-causing chemical vinyl chloride, Biden did not make the trip in 2023.

This was not an oversight. The Biden administration and the Democratic and Republican parties are directly responsible for the conditions that led to the disaster.

For years, railroad workers warned that the profit-driven policies imposed by the super-profitable rail companies, with the support of a subservient union apparatus, would lead to accidents. Months before the February 3 derailment in September 2022, thousands of railroad workers around the country voted overwhelmingly to go on strike. At issue were huge job losses forcing those left to operate increasingly longer trains, coupled with inadequate sick time and slave-like attendance policies, which created inherently dangerous conditions.

While rank-and-file railroad workers were ready to strike, the union apparatus, working with the White House, delayed action for months. After workers rejected another White House-brokered contract, Biden, the self-declared “most labor-friendly president in American history,” imposed the contract and banned a strike. This passed Congress in a bipartisan vote, which included pseudo-left representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez voting in favor. The disaster in East Palestine occurred two months later.

Biden's indifference to the health and well-being of thousands of workers and their families has provoked mass anger among the residents. Speaking to Louis DeAngelis of *Status Coup News* prior to Biden's visit, Lonnie Miller of

East Palestine said it was “too late” for Biden.

“Honestly, I don't want him here. I feel like he completely ignored our town, just like Norfolk Southern completely rolling over top of us that first week after the derailment. I just feel like he has turned his back on us from the very beginning.”

Krissy Ferguson told DeAngelis, “There is nothing, no way, to make it right.”

The callousness and indifference of the Biden administration has provided an opening for Donald Trump and the extreme right. Unlike Biden, Trump visited East Palestine three weeks after the derailment, accompanied by a few Proud Boys, who distributed bottled water.

Seeking to capitalize on widespread anger against Biden ahead of Friday's visit, local Republican officials organized a protest in the center of the town, which attracted about 200 people. Several Trump supporters waved nationalist flags and repeated Trump's lies concerning the 2020 election.

On the other side of the street, roughly 50 anti-genocide protesters, many from nearby Youngstown and Cleveland, also demonstrated against “Genocide Joe.” In addition to calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, several expressed sympathy for the workers and residents affected by the toxic exposure.

Keenly aware of Biden's broad unpopularity, coupled with the presence of hundreds of protesters, the hated president was not able to give an outdoor speech. Instead of meeting with local residents, Biden gave a short seven-minute speech in a warehouse in front of select press, a few politicians and bureaucrats. After giving his remarks, Biden turned his back on reporters without taking any questions, pretending to study a graphic on a poster behind him.

In his stilted and delusional remarks, Biden praised his administration's alleged “Herculean efforts” in response to the disaster. Speaking out of both sides of his mouth, the aged president said, “There is a lot more to do, although the

vast majority has been done.”

Biden restated his “support” for the “bipartisan Railway Safety Act.” In reality, this bill was dead on arrival due to opposition from the Republicans, as well as right-wing Democrats. After being introduced last May, the bill has languished in committees due to lobbying efforts by the railroads. In the year since the crash, Democrats and Republicans in Congress have made zero laws to increase rail safety or increase accountability by the profit-dominated rail companies.

Biden claimed that the derailment and subsequent decision by the rail company to initiate a “controlled release and burn” three days after the crash, which led to the massive contamination of the air, soil and water sources for miles in every direction, was a singular “act of greed” by the company that was “100 percent preventable.” In fact, it was done with the backing of the federal and state governments, which also stonewalled testing for dioxins and other poisonous substances to shield the railroad from responsibility.

While the poisoning of East Palestine was certainly a preventable man-made disaster, it was not a “one-off” event due to the actions of a single company or executive. The entire political system, which for decades under both Democratic and Republican administrations, has carried out deregulation and pro-corporate policies, is responsible for the conditions that led to the disaster, none of which has been ameliorated since.

Since the February 3 catastrophe, not a single executive from Norfolk Southern has been charged with a crime, even though it is well known that the decision to vent the tanks carrying vinyl chloride was not made out of concerns of an “imminent explosion” but to get the rail line cleared and running again in order to generate profit.

While the residents of East Palestine continue to suffer nose bleeds, asthma attacks, headaches and other severe medical issues, Norfolk Southern made \$527 million in profits in the fourth quarter of 2023. According to the Associated Press, the railway, eager to return money to its shareholders, plans to cut “7% of its managers this year and find ways to run more trains with the same number of crews by speeding up how quickly cargo moves across the railroad to help reduce its costs.”

The company confirmed to AP that the average speed of its trains “continued to creep up in the fourth quarter to 21.9 mph.”

The subordination of all of society, including safety, to the profit motive has had predictable tragic results.

Just this week, on February 14 in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, a railroad worker was killed after being struck by a train. In a brief statement, CSX confirmed that the “track maintenance employee was fatally injured while performing his duties.”

The week prior, on February 7, Norfolk Southern train engineer Chris Wilson, 55, of Muscle Shoals, Alabama, was killed after being struck by a train while in a rail yard in Decatur, Alabama. *Freightwaves* reported that Wilson died after “several uncontrolled train cars crashed into his locomotive, causing him to be ejected.”

The *New York Times* reported last month, citing regulatory reports from the first 10 months of 2023, that train derailments in the United States “rose at the top five freight railroads in 2023.” Additionally, there was a “steep increase” in the same mechanical failure investigators believe precipitated the East Palestine crash, an overheated wheel bearing.

According to *OpenSecrets.org*, in 2023, the railroad industry spent over \$24.3 million on lobbying politicians in Washington. Since 1998, the industry has collectively spent over \$770 million ensuring no regulations or laws would be passed that would encroach on their profits or lessen their exploitation of workers.

The fight for safe railroads and working conditions cannot be left in the hands of either capitalist party, the corporations, government or the nationalist trade unions. The paramount task of the working class in the United States and around the world is to break from the ruling class and fight for its own political program which corresponds to the historic needs of the working class: the abolition of capitalism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact