

Bernie Sanders' Senate hearing on 32-hour workweek aimed at promoting Biden, union apparatus

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On Thursday, Bernie Sanders held a Senate hearing on reducing the workweek from 40 to 32 hours with no loss in pay. The hearing was conducted by the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, which Sanders chaired. Among the witnesses called was United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain.

In addition, Sanders has sponsored legislation, which is dead on arrival given opposition from both Republicans and his fellow Democrats, to reduce the workweek to 32 hours.

In his opening remarks Thursday, Sanders pointed to the contradiction between “massive growth in technology and worker productivity” and the fact that workers are working “longer hours for lower wages.” Sanders pointed to shocking statistics which found that 28.5 million Americans work more than 60 hours a week, and 40 percent work more than 50 hours a week. Americans, he said, work “204 more hours a year than employees in Japan ... 279 more hours than workers in the United Kingdom, and 470 more hours than workers in Germany.”

Sanders' assertion that huge increases in productivity due to technology could be used to shorten the workweek with no loss in pay is certainly true. It is an indictment of the capitalist system, which is driven not by meeting social need but maximizing the extraction of surplus value from the working class, that the exact opposite has taken place.

But instead, Sanders presented the issue as not capitalism, but of “bad” policies to be replaced with “good” ones. This is in keeping with the specific role of Sanders, the self-described “democratic socialist,” within the Democratic Party, which is to use reformist demagoguery to cover for the party's right-wing policies and prevent the growing radicalization of workers and youth from escaping its control.

The hearing was also the latest in a series chaired by Sanders to stomp for the corrupt trade union bureaucracy. In November, Sanders chaired another hearing, which was also attended by Fain, as well as Teamsters President Sean

O'Brien and Association of Flight Attendants President Sara Nelson.

That hearing allowed the bureaucracy to posture as the friends of workers even as they enforce historic sellouts that have paved the way for the corporations to use automation and other technologies to carry out mass layoffs. In the auto industry, only months after the phony “stand-up strike” called by the UAW, thousands of jobs have been cut so far. This is only a down payment: Hundreds of thousands of jobs will be on the chopping block in the next few years as the industry moves towards electric vehicles, which require less labor to build.

At UPS, following another sellout contract by the Teamsters, over 12,000 jobs are being cut, and new automation is being introduced with the potential to eliminate 80 percent of all warehouse jobs.

There is enormous and growing opposition to this in the working class, who hold the bureaucracy responsible for these cuts. Earlier this month, fired temporary workers with the Rank-and-File Committee to Fight Job Cuts marched to the UAW headquarters to denounce the union bureaucracy and demand their jobs back.

Sanders' hearing was aimed at diverting this growing anger before it escapes the control of the bureaucracy or the Democratic Party. Remarkably, even though the hearing was ostensibly centered on the implications of automation for jobs, Sanders did not even acknowledge the issue of layoffs. To even admit they were happening would invite acknowledgment that Fain and the union bureaucracy are helping to carry them out, and that the so-called “historic contract victories” were huge lies.

In his testimony to the hearing, Fain bragged that the UAW had raised the issue of a 32-hour workweek during its “stand-up strike” last fall. But this demand, which the bureaucracy had no intention of fighting for, was raised only to capture rank-and-file opposition.

The fact that tens of millions of American workers stay on

the job for 60 hours a week or more is the product of decades of sellouts by the union bureaucracy, which has bargained away virtually everything that workers won through generations of struggle. While it dishonestly claimed to be fighting for a 32-hour week, the UAW in fact long ago gave up even the eight hour day under the so-called “Alternative Work Schedule,” and autoworkers are forced to stay on the job for seven days a week in some cases.

Sanders also presented the issue of automation and the workweek in purely national terms, as a problem essentially unique to the United States. Sanders pointed to European countries such as France, Denmark, Norway and Belgium, where legislation already exists establishing the workweek at less than 40 hours, as models for the US to follow.

In fact, the capitalist governments in all of these countries are carrying out savage austerity measures aimed at rolling back such concessions to the working class. In France, “President of the Rich” Emmanuel Macron rammed through huge pension cuts without even a vote by parliament, while responding to mass protests with police violence.

Another key aim of Sanders’ campaign over a 32-hour workweek is to stump for Biden’s re-election, under conditions in which he is deeply unpopular due to his right-wing policies. In fact, the economic policy of President Biden, whose re-election Sanders is vigorously campaigning for, is to impose mass layoffs to curb wage growth and beat back the rising wave of strikes by US workers.

In addition to increasing interest rates, Biden also relies on the union bureaucracy to impose sellout contracts and limit strikes. When workers have rebelled against sellouts, as railroad workers did in 2022, Biden did not hesitate to ban a strike and impose the contract workers rejected. Sanders himself played a key role in ensuring the swift passage of the anti-strike law, while also giving the Democrats some measure of political cover.

The UAW in particular enjoys exceptionally close ties with the White House. In November, Biden appeared with Fain in a pro-contract rally in front of a banner instructing autoworkers to get “back to work.” Biden has made several appearances since with Fain, while the UAW bureaucrats have helped to block or throw out anti-genocide protesters from the meeting halls.

The Biden administration’s labor policy is also a critical element in the mobilization of American society for world war. In his State of the Union address earlier this month, given over to rants against Russian president Vladimir Putin and the need to bring China to heel, Biden once again invoked the “Arsenal of Democracy,” the propaganda term for the US war economy during World War II, in which a “no strike” pledge by the unions played a key role. Biden also gave a shout out to Fain, who attended as a guest of the

First Lady Jill Biden, as a “great labor leader.” Fain, for his part, pledged at a recent event in Detroit to “go to war” for the president.

One other aspect of Sanders’ hearing last week deserves special attention. In his remarks, Sanders invoked Walter Reuther, UAW president during the post-World War II period. Sanders cited a Senate hearing from 1955 where Reuther advocated for a shorter workweek, where he declared, “The reduction of the workweek to 35 or 30 hours in the coming decade can be an important shock absorber during the transition to the widespread use of automation. It can both reduce the impact of sharp rises in output and increase the manpower requirements in industry and commerce.”

Reuther, a socialist in his youth, adopted in a highly diluted form demands originally raised by Leon Trotsky in the Transitional Program for a sliding scale of wages and working hours. Reuther did this to provide himself with credibility while in fact he was moving towards a total abandonment of any nominal opposition by the UAW to capitalism. In the 1950s, Reuther and the UAW bureaucracy purged the union of the socialist militants who had built the organization during the Great Depression and signed, for the first time, contracts explicitly recognizing “management rights.”

Reuther is often held up as the antipode to the current crop of bureaucrats who run the American trade unions. In reality, his policies paved the way for them. His upholding of capitalism could be combined with improvements to wages and working conditions only under the temporary conditions of the post-war economic boom, which was based on the unchallenged dominance of the US over the world economy. But with the end of the boom in the 1970s, US corporations abandoned the previous policy of buying labor peace with concessions, and the bureaucracy responded by integrating itself with management, helping to enforce mass layoffs and ripping up everything workers had won.

Reuther’s proposal for a 30-hour workweek remained a dead letter because of his own policy of subordinating the working class to capitalism. The lesson for the working class today is that the fight to defend jobs and working conditions requires a frontal assault on the “right” of corporations to a profit, and a rebellion against the union bureaucracy and the pro-corporate parties which enforce it.



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