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Trump seeks to exploit the East Palestine rail disaster for political gain



Former President Donald Trump speaks at the East Palestine Fire Department as he visits the area in the aftermath of the Norfolk Southern train derailment February 3 in East Palestine, Ohio, Wednesday, Feb. 22, 2023. [AP Photo/Matt Freed]

Former president Donald Trump visited East Palestine, Ohio Wednesday, in perhaps the most cynical of a series of visits by capitalist politicians this week. The small town has been devastated by the derailment of a huge Norfolk Southern train full of chemical tankers, five of which were set on fire by the railroad and state officials, releasing significant amounts of toxic chemicals into the environment.

Trump, bringing along with him several cases of “Trump”-branded water, postured as the friend of the people of East Palestine, in a visit where he was accompanied by Ohio’s

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Republican Senator J. D. Vance, newly elected in 2022, and the local congressman, Bill Johnson, also a Republican. The event was only the third public appearance by Trump since he announced a presidential campaign last November for the 2024 election.

East Palestine mayor Trent Conaway appeared alongside Trump, along with police and fire officials, whom Trump praised, while launching into a five-minute diatribe against the Biden administration's response to the disaster. He singled out the \$100 billion in US aid to Ukraine for the US-NATO proxy war against Russia, contrasting this vast sum to the pittance being sent to East Palestine.

Trump did not directly criticize the war, but rather suggested the European countries should pay more to support Ukraine, claiming the US share of war spending was disproportionate, given the size of the European economy. He also claimed that Biden administration officials were only coming to East Palestine because of his own visit, which had put them to shame.

Actually, Trump's appearance was part of a steady stream of capitalist politicians touring the disaster site and striking a posture of concern, even though most are on the payroll of Norfolk Southern, which made \$725,000 in campaign contributions, 51 percent to Democrats and 49 percent to Republicans, in order to ensure that the years of deregulation policies, including under both Trump and Biden, continue.

On Sunday, Democratic Senator Sherrod Brown visited the town. On Tuesday, it was the turn of Republican Governor Michael DeWine and Michael Regan, head of the federal Environmental Protection Administration (EPA), which has taken over the lead role in the clean-up of the disaster site from Norfolk Southern.

DeWine and Regan visited an East Palestine resident, assured her that tap water drawn from the municipal water system was safe, and to prove it, drank glasses of water in front of her as television cameras recorded the interaction. They were reprising the notorious appearance of President Barack Obama in Flint, when he drank a glass of water and contemptuously told the residents of the city to stop worrying—although this time, at least, it appears that the two officials actually drank water drawn from the kitchen tap, not provided to them by an aide.

DeWine and Regan were later joined by Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro (East Palestine is near the border between the two states.) Shapiro made a demagogic attack on Norfolk Southern, hailing the announcement by the EPA that the railroad would be assessed for the damage caused by the derailment, rather than continuing to make “voluntary” contributions to a fund for residents of the town.

During his visit Wednesday, Trump made no criticism of the railroad, saying in response to questions that he was confident that Norfolk Southern would meet its obligations. When reporters asked him about the actions of his own administration, which lifted regulations on railroads, including repealing a requirement that trains carrying toxic chemicals should be clearly labeled and local and state authorities notified, he refused to answer. Instead, he launched into his typical attack on “fake news,” as well as on the Biden administration, claiming that both were seeking to blame him for the disaster.

Trump’s visit is to be followed Thursday by Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, who released a proposal for stepped-up regulation of railroad safety in advance of his visit. This is an about face for Buttigieg, who last provoked anger with remarks minimizing the disaster on the grounds that more than 1,000 derailments take place every year in the US. Earlier this week, Buttigieg refused to commit to visiting East Palestine, saying he would only do so “when the time was right.”

While there has been heavy coverage of the East Palestine derailment and fire in the national media, virtually no mention has been made of the connection between the disaster and the congressional action, less than three months ago, banning a strike by 120,000 railroad workers in which understaffing, overwork and the consequences for rail safety were the central issue.

Senator Brown voted for the legislation, as did Republican Representative Johnson, who appeared alongside Trump on Wednesday. Both capitalist politicians, and their parties as a whole, bear responsibility for the events in East Palestine.

While there were three workers on the train when it derailed, the train was 151 cars long, making it impossible for the workers to properly monitor its condition. Moreover, Norfolk Southern has eliminated the position of track monitor, a worker who would have noticed the flames shooting out of the wheels 20 miles before the train reached East Palestine, and then alerted the crew.

The White House responded far more aggressively to Trump’s criticism than to the original disaster, seizing upon Trump’s own record in a bid to deflect attention from the Democrats’ role. White House spokesperson Andrew Bates declared, “Congressional Republicans and former Trump Administration officials owe East Palestine an apology for selling them out to rail industry lobbyists when they dismantled Obama-Biden rail safety protections as well as EPA powers to rapidly contain spills.”

In a tweet, likely written by an aide while Biden continued his warmongering tour through eastern Europe, the president declared, “Rail companies have spent millions of dollars to oppose common-sense safety regulations. And it’s worked. ... This is more than a train derailment or a toxic waste spill—it’s years of opposition to safety measures coming home to roost.”

Accusing the Republicans of selling out to rail lobbyists is a monumental piece of cynicism. Less than three months ago, the White House and congressional Democrats imposed a contract on the rail workers devised by rail lobbyists and a federal panel appointed by Biden.

Meanwhile, in East Palestine, federal officials are telling residents that despite the burning of tanker cars filled with vinyl chloride and other chemicals, producing a wide array of toxic byproducts, many still unknown, the air and water are safe and their complaints of headaches and other symptoms of illness are unwarranted.

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