

Sanders seeks to cast the Democrats as ally of coal miners at West Virginia town hall

By Naomi Spencer
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Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders made an appearance at a televised town hall event in Welch, West Virginia on March 12. The appearance, broadcast by MSNBC, was part of a national tour the former presidential candidate is carrying out on behalf of the Democratic Party.

Seeking to tap into popular anger over poverty, lack of jobs and attacks on health care and education, Sanders is attempting to convince disillusioned and disgusted voters that the Democrats can somehow be transformed into an instrument for progressive change. At the same time, he is promoting the trade unions, whose betrayals of miners' struggles have left the former coalfields of West Virginia desolate and the miners and their families impoverished.

Sanders is peddling his book *Our Revolution: A Future To Believe In*, in which he argues for nationalist economic policies and presents the Democratic Party as an organization receptive to grassroots transformation.

While presenting himself as an "independent" and "democratic socialist," Sanders has been elevated into the leadership of the Democratic Party precisely to contain the social opposition that gathered around his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. In a meeting with West Virginia Democratic Senator Joe Manchin and Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer in January, Sanders was told that his services were needed to make sure that public opposition to Donald Trump was "directed in all the right proper channels," i.e., exclusively against the Republicans. Manchin, Schumer and Sanders have all offered to work with the Trump administration, glossing over the ultra-right-wing content of its policies. Manchin, a former governor of West Virginia, has gone out of his way to express admiration and support for Trump.

The West Virginia event, organized by Sanders'

office for the MSNBC program "All In With Chris Hayes," was attended by a registration-only audience estimated at 250-350 people. The show was pre-recorded and edited by MSNBC for airing March 13. The taping was held at Mount View High School in Welch. No other media were permitted to record audio or video of the event.

Sanders, who ran in the Democratic primaries as a self-described "socialist" before backing Hillary Clinton, carried every county in West Virginia, some by considerable margins. Clinton, a longtime ally of Wall Street and the military/intelligence establishment and former secretary of state under Barack Obama, was seen as a personification of the corrupt status quo and widely hated in the state. In the general election, Republican Donald Trump received 74 percent of the vote on the basis of his pseudo-populist, anti-establishment demagoguery.

Promoted as "an unscripted, no-holds-barred conversation," the town hall was a carefully stage-managed affair, featuring Chris Hayes as moderator and several small panel sessions. West Virginia House of Delegates member Ed Evans, a Democrat, also participated on-stage.

The panelists included a selection of doctors, professionals, a coal miner and other residents of McDowell County and the surrounding area. Some of the participants, identified simply as local residents, were actually Democratic Party politicians, officials and activists. Sabrina Shrader, who spoke about deep poverty in Welch, was a 2016 Democratic Party candidate for House of Delegates in District 27 (Mercer and Raleigh Counties). Paula Swearingin, "a single mom" who was featured in a "behind-the-scenes" video on social media crying on Sanders' shoulder, is an environmental activist with a history of lobbying on

behalf of the Sierra Club.

Sanders' remarks on the economy, infrastructure and health care deviated little from stump speeches he has given over the past year. He called for a \$1 trillion infrastructure program to create jobs--an echo of President Trump's exaggerated campaign promises. Time and again, Sanders has gone out of his way to express support for Trump's "America First" economic policies, which have the backing of the unions. As he said after Trump signed an executive order withdrawing the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact, "If President Trump is serious about a new policy to help American workers, then I would be delighted to work with him."

In the town hall event, Sanders appealed to opposition to the Republican-controlled Congress's attack on the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), which would throw thousands of poor West Virginians off the Medicaid rolls, including retired coal miners and recovering opioid addicts. Dr. Lori Tucker, an obstetrician and gynecologist on the panel, explained that three-quarters of her patients depend on Medicaid.

"Instead of giving tax breaks to billionaires," Sanders declared, "I think we need to ask them to pay their fair share." To applause from the audience, he urged West Virginia Republican Senator Shelley Moore Capito to join Senator Manchin and oppose the proposed repeal.

The region has been crippled by a long-term decline in coal, with thousands of miners laid off and thousands more people forced to leave in search of work. McDowell County is among the worst-off counties in the country and is classified as being in economic depression. It has the lowest life expectancy for men in the US.

Much of the town hall event focused on the prospect of a revival in coal mining. President Trump, declaring he will "Make coal great again," has attacked regulations on the industry. Democratic Governor Jim Justice has pursued similar policies at the state level, reversing environmental regulations and provisions for safety inspections. Because the Democratic Party has been identified with Environmental Protection Agency regulations that the right wing has blamed for the structural decline in the coal industry, called "Obama's war on coal," Sanders took pains to proclaim coal miners "heroes" and thank them for their work.

The senator blamed Republicans for the crisis in the

miners' pension system, saying they were "holding up legislation." At no point did Sanders mention the role of the United Mine Workers union in suppressing rank-and-file opposition to attacks on jobs, benefits and working conditions.

As one company after another took shelter in the bankruptcy courts and shed their pension obligations, the UMW and its Democratic Party allies stood by. In West Virginia, the coal industry has run roughshod over the population with the active collaboration of the Democrats, who controlled the state government for 80 years. A case in point is the Democrat Jim Justice, a billionaire coal executive who was heartily endorsed as "one of the good coal operators" by the UMW.

Sanders trod lightly on the question of climate change and the burning of fossil fuels, which the miner on the panel insisted were not connected. "The choice is not protecting our planet and throwing these people out onto the street," the senator said. "The choice is reinvesting in communities that have been devastated by changes in energy and giving people decent-paying jobs." Sanders made no proposals as to the "decent-paying jobs" that might replace the coal industry, but tourism and the promotion of "small business" benefiting a layer of the upper-middle class has long been pitched as an alternative by the social types present at the Welch event.

Although promoted as a "microcosm" of the problems gripping rural and small towns across the country, the Welch event was notably silent on many of the major issues of the day, including the vicious attacks on immigrants, widespread domestic spying and the danger of world war. This is because the Democratic Party has no real objection to these attacks, and Sanders himself has repeatedly called for nationalist trade barriers and a belligerent stance on Russia.

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