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Trump, Buttigieg and the East Palestine Train Derailment

Townspeople in Ohio become props for politicians fanning anxiety.

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39 pm ET



Former President Donald Trump arrives at the East Palestine Fire Department in East Palestine, Ohio, Feb. 22.

PHOTO: MATT FREED/ASSOCIATED PRESS

It's still unclear what caused the Feb. 3 train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, but Donald Trump and his opponents aren't letting the tragedy go to political waste. The former President on Wednesday lambasted the Biden Administration's response during a visit to the rural Ohio town, while Democrats spin a progressive parable of corporate greed.

Local public anger is boiling over amid a lack of certainty about what caused the Norfolk Southern Corp. derailment, how long it will take to clean up the disaster, and what the long-term environmental harm might be. Enter Mr. Trump, who on Wednesday donned a superman cape and handed out bottled water while denouncing Biden officials. "They were doing nothing for you," he said. "They were intending to do nothing for you."

Bottled water aside, Mr. Trump may have made matters worse by suggesting the tap water is unsafe, even as Gov. Mike DeWine and Environmental Protection Agency head Michael Regan were drinking tap water themselves to reassure the public.

But Biden officials have also contributed to the mistrust with a cookie-cutter progressive narrative. In a Feb. 19 letter to Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg accused railroads of spending “millions of dollars in the courts and lobbying members of Congress to oppose common-sense safety regulations, stopping some entirely and reducing the scope of others” while buying back stock.

Mr. Buttigieg cites a 2015 Obama Administration regulation mandating Electronically Controlled Pneumatic (ECP) braking technology on some trains carrying flammable liquids such as oil. ECP brakes apply pressure throughout trains instantaneously, unlike conventional brakes in which each car receives a signal sequentially through an air pipe.

The costly rule provided marginal safety benefits, but it would have advanced the left’s anti-fossil fuel agenda: First, block pipelines. Then make it prohibitively expensive to move oil by rail. Industry groups sued, and Congress instructed the Transportation Department to re-evaluate its analysis and the Government Accountability Office to do an assessment.

GAO in 2016 identified myriad problems with the government’s cost-benefit analysis, and the Trump Administration rescinded the rule in 2018. There’s no evidence ECP brakes would have prevented the derailment, and the Obama rule wouldn’t have applied to the Norfolk Southern train because it wasn’t classified as a “high hazard flammable unit train.”

Mr. Buttigieg also criticized Norfolk Southern and other railroads for deploying technology to inspect tracks, which labor unions oppose. Automated inspections are more efficient and can detect safety problems better and more quickly than the human eye. But Biden regulators have limited the technology’s use, and there’s no evidence it contributed to the derailment.

Mr. Buttigieg also claimed that the accident supports the need for union-backed regulations requiring a minimum of two crew-members on trains. Technology is making it safer and more efficient to operate freight trains with one worker in the cab, as many passenger trains do. Regardless, the East Palestine train had three crew members.

Another Buttigieg red herring: Paid sick leave will make trains safer. “A healthy and well-supported workforce is a safer workforce,” he says. Again, there’s no evidence a shortage of paid sick leave contributed to the disaster. And why is he re-litigating a fight between unions and railroads that his boss and Congress settled late last year?

Demands by four railroad unions for more paid sick leave nearly resulted in a crippling national strike last fall. But Congress passed and President Biden signed legislation imposing a contract that grants unions a 24% pay raise over five years plus an unscheduled

day of sick leave on top of existing railroad policies that offer an average three weeks of vacation.

Mr. Buttigieg also flogs \$18 billion that Norfolk Southern has reportedly spent on buying back stock and dividends in the past five years, which he suggests came at the expense of safety. But there's no evidence of that either. Train derailments have fallen by half since 2003 and by more than 80% since 1980 even as deregulation has made railroads more efficient and profitable.

There are still roughly 1,000 derailments a year, as Mr. Buttigieg said last week, and the one in East Palestine has drawn more attention than most because of its major damage. But politicians aren't helping anyone in the town by exploiting the tragedy for their own ends.

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