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TED CRUZ UNITES WITH BERNIE SANDERS BEHIND FAILED PUSH FOR RAIL WORKER SICK LEAVE

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WASHINGTON — Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, doesn't often find himself in the same camp as the most left-leaning members of the Senate, including Sen. Bernie Sanders, the self-described Democratic Socialist from Vermont.

But Cruz was among a half dozen Senate Republicans who backed Sanders' push Thursday to award seven days of sick leave to rail workers as part of a federally mandated labor agreement intended to avoid an economy-crippling strike.

The 52-43 tally on the sick leave proposal fell well short of the 60 votes required for adoption. It had the support of nearly all Senate Democrats and the opposition of most Senate Republicans.

But the support from Cruz and a few other conservative Republicans demonstrates how the party's newfound populism has at least blurred some traditional political lines.

Cruz described this week as an illustration of how the GOP is becoming the party of blue collar workers.

"That is an important shift of the last decade, that the people we are fighting for every day are rail workers and truck drivers and steel workers and cops and firefighters and the Democrat Party more and more is becoming a party of urban elites," Cruz said as he left the Capitol following the vote.

The rail labor dispute threatened massive negative repercussions for Texas, as everyone from agricultural producers to chemical manufacturers in the state rely on trains to move their supplies and finished products.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and a large coalition of business groups wrote a letter earlier this week pleading with lawmakers to take action to avert a strike.

Among the signatories: the Texas Ag Industries Association, Texas Association of Business, [Texas Business Leadership Council](#), Texas Grain and Feed Association and the Texas Trucking Association.

"While a voluntary agreement with the four holdout unions is the best outcome, the risks to America's economy

and communities simply make a national rail strike unacceptable," the groups wrote. "Therefore, absent a voluntary agreement, we call on you to take immediate steps to prevent a national rail strike and the certain economic destruction that would follow."

But Cruz objected to the mandated settlement as the government forcing a deal down rail workers' throats.

The Senate took three votes Thursday related to the rail labor impasse and on each one Cruz came down on the opposite side of his home-state Republican colleague Sen. John Cornyn.

Cruz first supported a proposal for an additional cooling off period to allow more time for negotiation between the railroads and their workers, a proposal that failed on a 25-70 vote.

He then voted for the sick leave proposal and against the underlying mandated settlement, which was approved 80-15.

The settlement includes a 24 percent pay boost in the coming years along with other provisions to benefit the workers. But several of the unions involved have rejected it over concerns about work attendance policies such as sick leave.

Cruz said it became clear the proposed cooling off period was doomed and the inevitable outcome would be approval of the forced settlement.

"I don't think that makes sense," Cruz said. "I don't think it was fair. I thought the rail workers' demands were quite reasonable."

Cornyn had previously expressed sympathy for the sick leave issue but voted against that amendment Thursday before supporting the underlying settlement.

"You start thinking about what this means for Congress getting involved in every collective bargaining agreement or labor dispute, and I just think it's a bad precedent," Cornyn told reporters ahead of the votes.

When a strike seemed imminent back in September, Cornyn was among those calling on President Joe Biden to do whatever it took to avert a work stoppage that would have had dire economic consequences.

At that time, Cornyn referred to the 24 percent pay boost as "pretty extravagant" and accused Democrats of putting the needs of labor unions ahead of American consumers.

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Cruz this week has defended the rail workers and downplayed the size of the pay increases they're receiving relative to inflation. He said their concerns about having access to sick leave are reasonable.

"Just about every other job, if you get sick you don't have to put in multiple days ahead of time before you get sick . . . you typically don't know ahead of time if you're going to get sick," Cruz said, echoing progressive champions of the sick leave proposal.

Cruz said he and Sanders had a chuckle on the Senate floor over their odd couple pairing.

"I told him on the floor that I just voted with him and I said, 'Bernie, I don't know if that hurts you more or me more,'" Cruz said.