

# The unionization vote at Alabama Amazon facility

## Build rank-and-file committees to defend worker rights

**International Amazon Workers Voice**  
**15 January 2021**

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has given the go-ahead to the union recognition vote at the Amazon fulfillment center in Bessemer, Alabama, just outside of Birmingham. Workers are expected to vote February 8 on whether to certify the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), which is affiliated with the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union, as their official bargaining agent.

Working conditions at BHM1, like Amazon warehouses around the world, are exploitative and dangerous. Sara Marie Thrasher, who worked as a “stower” in the facility before getting fired, told *The American Prospect*, “They work you to death. It’s crowded. Sometimes you can’t even find a station. We would get reprimanded if our stowing time was above 20 seconds or higher, with rates needing to be done in 8 seconds per item.” Another worker Bryon added, “It was almost set up like a sweatshop.”

Workers urgently require organization and leadership to fight for their rights against the transnational retail giant. But they cannot advance their struggle against Amazon by voting in the RWDSU or any other trade union. Far from “representing” workers, the unions function as bureaucratic tools of corporate management, suppressing democratic discussion among workers and their strivings to improve working conditions and living standards, and protecting the profit interests of the employers.

Because of this, the *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV) calls on BHM1 workers to cast a “no” vote in the upcoming certification election. Instead, workers should form a rank-and-file committee, democratically controlled by workers themselves, to fight against speedup, poverty wages and management abuse. BHM1 workers should link up with Amazon workers to build similar committees throughout the US and internationally, and to unite with workers across all industries and services to fight the dictatorship that billionaires like Amazon’s Jeff Bezos impose in their workplaces and over society as whole.

### Do the RWDSU and UFCW protect workers?

As of December 18, over 50,000 meatpacking workers contracted COVID-19 and 262 have died, according to the Food and Environment Reporting Network. A December report by the US Department of Agriculture found that meatpacking counties had COVID-19 infections 10 times the rate of other rural counties.

The RWDSU and the UFCW, which have a heavy presence in the meatpacking industry, bear a direct responsibility for these catastrophic conditions. Again and again, they have intervened on behalf of the companies to keep production running amid mass infections and deaths.

Last July, UFCW Local 7 intervened to shut down a wildcat strike at the JBS beef plant in Greeley, Colorado. At the Tyson pork plant in Waterloo, Iowa, where management took bets on how many workers would become infected, the UFCW even collaborated with those same managers to work out bonus pay for perfect attendance. Over 1,000 workers became infected at this one facility and 5 have died.

“I feel like [union dues are] a waste of money,” one worker told the *Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier*. “the things that they should do, it’s like they don’t want to do.” Officials from UFCW 431 ignored dozens of inquiries by the paper’s reporters.

Sheila, a meatpacking worker at a Tyson facility in Tennessee, described to the *World Socialist Web Site* how the RWDSU functioned, not as a democratic organization of workers, but a bureaucratic tool of management. There’s a “Safety Committee” inside the plant made up of a group of employees, she said, these “union reps” were not chosen by rank-and-file workers but “by the floor supervisors. One from each department,” she said.

Asked if they enforced safety, Sheila replied, “Not really... because they don’t see or really care about it.” Jessie, another Tyson worker, added that management, with the help of the union, enforces a system of intimidation where workers are afraid to speak out: “Everyone is afraid to speak up because

they will lose their jobs. It's not right."

Over the last forty years, the UFCW has collaborated with the companies in enforcing a drastic decline in the standard of living of meatpacking workers, once the most heavily unionized sections of the workforce whose wages were comparable to workers in auto and steel production. During the 1980s, the UFCW betrayed a series of strikes by Hormel, Morrell, Iowa Beef Processing, Oscar Mayer and other meatpacking workers, which resulted in drastic wage cuts.

When workers resisted, as during the 1985–86 Hormel strike, the UFCW removed the elected leadership, put the local under trusteeship and helped the meatpacking bosses smash the strike. As a result, meatpacking wages, which had been 17 percent higher than average manufacturing wages in 1980, fell to 24 percent lower than manufacturing wages by 2002.

The transformation of the unions is not simply the result of the cowardice and corruption of union leaders, although there is plenty of that to go around. It is a result of the pro-capitalist and nationalist character of the unions in the US and around the world. The unions were incapable of a progressive response to globalization and the ability of transnational corporations to shift production anywhere in the world in search of cheaper labor. Instead, the unions collaborated with the corporations to lower wages in the US even as they blamed workers in other countries for the endless givebacks they handed to big business.

The experiences of unionized Amazon workers in other countries demonstrates this. The trade unions Verdi and UNI global have launched several strikes in German Amazon warehouses since the outbreak of the pandemic, but the strikes have all been isolated from other sections of workers, and each time ended with the workers defeated and returning to work under similar conditions. Similar outcomes took place with Amazon workers organized by trade unions in France, Spain, Italy and Poland.

### **Amazon workers must form their own rank-and-file committees**

Teachers, autoworkers and other sections of workers are setting up their own rank-and-file committees around the country, in rebellion against the unions, to fight for the shutdown of schools and nonessential industries and to demand full compensation for all workers until the pandemic is contained and it is safe to return to work and school.

Amazon workers at the BW12 plant in Baltimore formed a rank and file committee in December. A member of the committee explained why other Amazon workers should get involved: "All Amazonians should have a strong voice to be the agents of change in order to maintain a safe working environment as well as fair labor practices. All Amazonians

should fight to build a rank-and-file committee in their facilities."

Amazon workers at BHM1 should follow in their footsteps and build their own committee. Starting with what workers need, and not what Jeff Bezos and Amazon claim they can afford, they should organize Amazon workers around a common set of demands. We propose that these demands include:

- Workers oversight of safety and quotas
- Regular COVID-19 testing
- Complete transparency about infections and deaths
- Abolition of "Time off task" monitoring
- An end to poverty wages

These rank-and-file committees must combine the fight for day-to-day interests of workers with the fight to mobilize the entire working class in the US and around the world against the capitalist system, which has sacrificed hundreds of thousands of lives during the pandemic to bolster the wealth of the super-rich. The world's billionaires have increased their wealth by over \$1 trillion over the course of the pandemic. Jeff Bezos' net worth rose by 63 percent even as more than 20,000 Amazon workers have been infected.

The ill-gotten wealth of Bezos and the other pandemic profiteers must be expropriated to pay for a massive public health program, including a vast increase in production and distribution of vaccines and the shutdown of nonessential production, with wages fully guaranteed. Amazon and other logistics giants must be transformed into public utilities owned collectively and democratically controlled by the working class.

Rank-and-file committees must also serve as the means for mobilizing the working class against the threat of dictatorship, including the preparation for a political general strike. The looting of society by the rich is incompatible with democracy and provided the political and social context behind Trump's attempted fascist coup in Washington on January 6. But the Democrats, who support the same "herd immunity" as Trump, are doing nothing to oppose it, responding instead by calling for "bipartisan unity" with the very same Republicans who conspired with Trump to overthrow the government. This shows that it is working class, not any faction within the ruling elite, which is the central political force to defeat the right-wing conspirators, including raising the demand for a full congressional investigation into Trump's plot.

*For help forming a rank-and-file committee, contact us through the World Socialist Web Site International Amazon Workers Voice.*



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