

Union election in Alabama: Which way forward for Amazon workers?

International Amazon Workers Voice
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The 5,800 workers at the BHM1 Amazon fulfillment center in Bessemer, Alabama, will soon vote on whether to accept representation by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), an affiliate of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). Mail-in voting will start February 8 and end March 29 with the tally expected the next day. On Friday, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) rejected a motion by Amazon to delay the vote.

The International Amazon Workers Voice (IAWV) has been at the forefront of exposing the ruthlessness of the online retail and logistics giant, which is notorious for demanding inhuman levels of productivity, putting its workers at high risk of injury and keeping them under constant surveillance. Last year, Amazon doubled its annual profit to \$21.3 billion and owner Jeff Bezos added another \$68 billion to his \$184 billion personal fortune. At the same time, more than 20,000 Amazon workers were infected with COVID-19 last year and an unknown number have died.

Among workers there is enormous anger over these appalling conditions and a strong desire to organize to fight for improved wages and conditions and to stop management abuse. If the RWDSU was such an organization, the International Amazon Workers Voice (IAWV) would encourage workers to vote for it. But it is not. Long and bitter experience has shown that workers cannot take a single step forward in the fight for decent wages and conditions through organizations like the RWDSU, the UFCW and others which have spent decades practicing labor-management collusion and subordinating the interests of workers to the profits of the corporations. If the RWDSU is voted in, it will not fight for workers' demands and workers would quickly find themselves in a fight not only against the company, but the union too.

The way forward for Bessemer and all Amazon workers is to form rank-and-file warehouse committees, controlled democratically by workers themselves, that are committed to a collective struggle to break management's dictatorship over the workplace, fight for a significant increase in wages and benefits, and extend the democratic control of workers over line speed, safety conditions and COVID-19 protections. This committee should affiliate with the growing national and international network of rank-and-file committees in factories,

schools and other workplaces.

Amazon attempted unsuccessfully to block mail-in ballots, largely borrowing Trump's claims that such votes would be suspect and invalid. It demanded in-person voting, even as the state has a staggering 21 percent COVID-19 positivity rate, so that management could continue to intimidate workers and pressure them during the voting process itself. The company has conducted a relentless campaign, posting signs inside toilet stalls and sending as many as five texts per day to workers at the facility, warning workers not to abandon "the winning team." Workers have also been required to attend meetings where managers seek to browbeat them.

The IAWV opposes management harassment and upholds the democratic right of workers to vote as they choose in the union election. Whichever way the vote goes, however, the task confronting workers will be the same: the building of an independent rank-and-file committee to lead the fight of workers to defend themselves.

Amazon's opposition to unionization is not driven by any fear that the RWDSU will interfere with its unilateral control over the workforce and conditions, let alone significantly raise labor costs. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos has a business model in which it directly oversees the exploitation of the workforce without having to deal with a middleman like the RWDSU.

If the RWDSU or any other union were brought into Amazon facilities, management would quickly adapt to the new arrangement and collaborate with the union leadership to keep labor costs down and productivity up. That has been the fate of Amazon workers in Germany, Spain and other European countries, where many Amazon facilities are unionized and the conditions for workers remain poor, with low wages, job insecurity and continued high rates of exploitation.

While Amazon points to the corruption of union officials for its own purposes, the RWDSU and UFCW executives are certainly guilty of using workers' dues money to fund their lavish lifestyles rather than fight the corporations. Marc Perrone, the president of the RWDSU's parent union, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), made \$340,000 in union salaries and disbursements in 2019, about 10 times the average wage of a UFCW meatpacking or grocery worker. RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum is not far behind,

pocketing \$337,000 in 2019.

At the same time, the UFCW spent just three-quarters of one percent of its nearly \$400 million in assets on benefits for striking workers in 2019.

Amazon workers are rightfully outraged over the company's criminal indifference towards their safety during the pandemic, but the RWDSU and UFCW have done nothing to protect workers in the industries they cover. As of February 3, 57,164 meatpacking workers have tested positive for COVID-19, and 278 have died, according to the Food and Environment Reporting Network. At the Tyson plant in Waterloo, Iowa, where managers were betting on how many workers would be infected, workers denounced the UFCW Local 431 for being in bed with management.

This corruption exposed in unions like the United Auto Workers (UAW)—whose officials have been jailed for taking bribes from Fiat Chrysler to cut the wages of workers—is only the most grotesque expression of the collapse of the trade unions, which once covered 35 percent of the US workforce and today cover only 6.3 percent of private sector workers, and their transformation into arms of corporate management.

Under the pressure of increasing globalization and the ability of giant corporations to shift production to any part of the world for cheaper labor, the unions were transformed in the 1980s and 1990s from organizations that once pressured the corporations to improve the wages and conditions of workers into organizations that pressure workers for concessions to make the corporations more “competitive.” After decades of union-backed pay cuts, wages in the auto industry are so low that GM, Ford and other UAW-organized companies find it hard to compete with Amazon's \$15-an-hour wage to attract workers.

By accepting the unchallenged “right” of the capitalist owners to do as they please with the giant factories, warehouses and industrial facilities, the unions have sat by as tens of millions of workers saw their factories and steel mills closed and cities like Detroit and Birmingham transformed into industrial wastelands.

Politically, the unions are also aligned with the Democratic Party, which defends the wealth and power of the corporate owners just like the Republicans. The Biden administration and local Democrats are spearheading unsafe school reopenings in cities like Chicago, San Francisco, Washington D.C. and Montgomery, Alabama. Figures like Sanders, who is backing the unionization campaign at Amazon, provide a “left” cover for the unions, which in turn peddle the false claim that the Democrats represent workers.

The stand taken by the Chicago teachers to protect their lives and the lives of their students is part of a growing wave of working-class resistance in the US and around the world against the pandemic profiteers—and their political mouthpieces—who have sacrificed the lives of 2.3 million people in the world, and nearly half a million in the US, to enrich themselves. In the coming months, Amazon and other

logistics workers will be involved in immense struggles.

Amazon workers should reject the attempt by the unions and the Democratic Party to hijack and disrupt their struggles. The International Amazon Workers Voice calls on Bessemer workers to lead the fight to build new, independent organizations, which will truly defend the interests of Amazon workers: rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and based on what workers need, not what the giant corporation says is affordable must be built.

This committee should fight for:

- An immediate 40 percent raise and fully funded health care and pension benefits
- An end to company spying and management's dictatorial control of the workplace
- For workers' control over production, including rates, safety and COVID-19 protection
- State-of-the-art personal protective equipment, ventilation and social distancing protocols
- The right to halt production when conditions are unsafe, with no retaliation against workers or whistleblowers
- Full transparency, with weekly reports of the number of infections and work locations
- Full pay for all workers on medical leave or for quarantining

These demands cannot be secured without a united and independent struggle of the working class, which begins with what workers and their families need, not what the billionaires and their flunkies in both corporate-controlled parties and unions claim is affordable.

To carry forward their initiative to organize and fight back against one of the most powerful corporations in the world, a BHM1 rank-and-file committee must connect its struggle with the growing movement among educators, autoworkers, transit workers and fellow Amazon workers against the pandemic and social inequality. This movement includes the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the Baltimore Amazon BWI2 Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

We urge all those interested in learning more and joining this fight to contact us directly at iawv@wsws.org, or by signing up at wsws.org/workers.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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