

Why Biden supports the unionization of the Amazon workforce

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On Sunday night, President Joe Biden issued a video statement fully backing the efforts of the Retail, Wholesale, Department Store Union (RWDSU) to unionize workers at Amazon's Bessemer, Alabama warehouse. Nearly 6,000 workers at the facility, which is located just outside of Birmingham, are currently voting on whether to join the RWDSU.

Biden clearly called on workers in Alabama to vote "yes" on the union drive, for which balloting concludes on March 29. "The National Labor Relations Act didn't just say unions are *allowed* to exist," he said. "It said we should *encourage* unions."

He continued, "Today and over the next few days and weeks workers in Alabama and all across America are voting on whether to organize a union in their workplace. This is vitally important—a vitally important choice—as America grapples with the deadly pandemic, the economic crisis, and the reckoning of race—what it reveals about the deep disparities that still exist in our country."

Biden's intervention is historically unprecedented. After President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the National Labor Relations Act into law in 1935, the leaders of the newly organized industrial unions declared that "The president wants you to join a union." But FDR never actually said that.

In this case, Biden gave no indication of impartiality, all but calling on workers to vote the union in and accusing Amazon of intimidation. Biden is putting the entire prestige of the White House behind the vote. He would not have done this unless he felt that the direct support of his administration was both necessary to ensure a "yes" vote in Bessemer and strategically important.

The very fact that Biden has intervened so forcefully exposes the claims that what is involved in the unionization campaign at Amazon has anything to do with the interests of Amazon workers. Biden's entire career in the Senate, from 1973 to 2009, coincides with the abandonment by the Democratic Party of any program of social reform and its accommodation to "Reaganomics."

Long known as Delaware's "senator from DuPont," Biden served on committees that were most sensitive to the interests of the ruling class, including the Judiciary Committee and the Foreign Relations Committee. He supported the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act in 1999, a milestone in the deregulation of the banks, and other right-wing measures. After nearly four decades in the Senate, Biden became Obama's vice president, helping to oversee the massive bailout of Wall Street following the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent restructuring of class relations to benefit the rich. That included the bailout of General Motors and Chrysler,

based on a 50 percent cut in the pay of all newly hired autoworkers.

In the 2020 elections, Biden won the Democratic Party nomination for president through the intervention of the party leadership on the basis of an explicit repudiation of any program of social reform. Biden was promoted as the right-wing alternative to Bernie Sanders.

Biden's aggressive intervention on behalf of the unionization campaign at Amazon can only be interpreted as a strategic, and not merely tactical decision by a significant faction of the ruling class. What are the considerations motivating this policy?

First, the ruling class confronts an unprecedented crisis, which has been enormously intensified by the pandemic. As a result of the refusal of the ruling class to take the necessary measures to save lives, nearly 530,000 people have died from COVID-19 over the past year. The impact of mass death, combined with the disastrous social and economic situation, is having a profoundly radicalizing impact on the consciousness of workers and youth.

Trump has responded to this situation with the promotion of fascist organizations that will be used as a spearhead against working class unrest. The Democrats are attempting to smother social opposition by utilizing the unions. This is combined with their relentless efforts to divide workers against each other through the promotion of the politics of racial and gender identity. Significantly, Biden framed his intervention at Amazon in racial terms, presenting unions as instruments for defending "especially Black and Brown workers."

Second, the international situation is no less concerning to the ruling class, which is determined to maintain its global hegemonic position through the use of military force. The Biden administration is carrying out an increasingly confrontational policy toward Russia and, in particular, China. The logic of this policy leads to war. In the event of a major "great power conflict," the pro-capitalist unions will be critical in promoting national chauvinism and suppressing the class struggle. War abroad requires a disciplined "labor movement" at home.

Biden's intervention at Amazon is part of a broader strategy of promoting the unions and integrating them ever more directly into the state apparatus and corporate management. Prior to his inauguration in January, Biden pledged that he would be the most "pro-union" president ever.

In mid-November, shortly after the 2020 elections, Biden held a meeting with the leaders of all the major unions, including AFL-

CIO President Richard Trumka, along with corporate executives from General Motors, Microsoft, Target and other companies. Biden reportedly told the meeting that he is “a union guy,” but insisted “that’s not anti-business.” He added that “we’re in a pretty dark hole right now,” but “we [that is, the union executives, the corporate CEOs and the incoming Biden administration] all agree on common goals.”

The strategy Biden is pursuing is known as corporatism—that is, the integration of the government with the corporations and the unions on the basis of a defense of the capitalist system. In 1938, Trotsky drew attention to this tendency when he wrote, in the founding document of the Fourth International, “In periods of acute class struggle, the leading bodies of the trade unions aim to become masters of the mass movement in order to render it harmless... In time of war or revolution, when the bourgeoisie is plunged into exceptional difficulties, trade union leaders usually become bourgeois ministers.”

Trotsky was writing at a time when workers in newly established industrial unions were engaged in insurrectionary struggles against the ruling class, including the mass sit-down strikes of autoworkers in the US.

It has been decades since the AFL-CIO was associated in any way with the defense of workers’ interests against the corporations and the ruling class. Since the isolation and defeat of the PATCO air traffic controllers strike in 1981, the trade union movement has been completely integrated into the structures of corporate management. During the 1980s, the unions played a critical role in isolating and suppressing opposition to the ruling class counter-offensive spearheaded by the Reagan administration.

With the assistance of the unions, strike activity was almost entirely suppressed in the 1990s and the first decades of the 21st century, facilitating an increase in social inequality to levels not seen since the 1920s.

In 2018, during oral arguments before the Supreme Court in the case of *Janus vs. AFSCME* (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees), a lawyer for AFSCME summed up the role of the unions by saying that the “agency fee”—the requirement that public service employees in some states pay the equivalent of dues even if they opt out of joining a union—“is the tradeoff for no strikes.” Without maintaining the financial security of the unions, he warned, “you can raise an untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country.”

The corporatist organizations like the AFL-CIO are still called “unions,” but their actual practice and role bear no relationship to the function traditionally associated with the term “union.” They are not workers’ organizations, but instruments of management and the state.

The ruling class, however, is extremely concerned with and sensitive to the growth of opposition in the working class, which has been concretized in the movement for rank-and-file committees, including among Amazon workers, which has been spearheaded by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*. The ruling class is, moreover, aware of the ability of workers in the US and internationally to utilize social media and other forms of communication to share information and organize outside of the control of the corporatist unions.

There is particular concern over the political radicalization of Amazon workers, who have become even more critical to the overall process of capitalist exploitation since the onset of the pandemic. The world’s fifth largest employer added 427,000 jobs in 2020, bringing its total to 1.3 million employees worldwide, including half a million in the US.

The promotion of the unions is aimed at countering the expanding movement of rank-and-file workers. It is aimed at subordinating workers to the array of laws that come into effect when the unions are established as the “sole legitimate” representative of the workers. In return, the union executives will be given access to the union dues that come from the institutionalization of these organizations in broader sections of industry.

The combination of aggressive backing by the government and anger and opposition among Amazon workers could produce a victory for the union drive in Bessemer. Whatever the outcome of the vote, the fight to establish and build rank-and-file committees must be developed and expanded. Workers cannot allow themselves to be disciplined by the pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist trade union apparatus.

This must be combined with a new political strategy to mobilize the working class in the US and internationally in the fight for socialist policies, including the expropriation of pandemic profiteers like Amazon owner Jeff Bezos and the transformation of Amazon and other logistics companies into public utilities, democratically controlled and collectively owned by the working class.

At its most fundamental level, the promotion of the unions by the ruling class is aimed at quarantining workers from socialism. The overriding fear of the ruling class is that the objective radicalization of the working class, intensified by the pandemic, will acquire a socialist leadership and political program. It is this fear that is behind Biden’s extraordinary intervention at Amazon.



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