

Amazon workers speak on the Alabama union vote

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Amazon workers in Alabama and across the United States are speaking out about the ongoing union certification vote at the Bessemer, Alabama facility. Nearly 6,000 workers are voting on whether to join the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), with ballots due on March 29.

Amazon is notorious for its exploitation of workers around the world, including half a million in the US. This is underscored by the tragic suicide of 48-year-old Paul Vilseck, who jumped to his death at the LAS7 fulfilment center in North Las Vegas, Nevada on Monday.

After a year that has seen more than 20,000 Amazon workers infected by COVID-19 while company owner Jeff Bezos increased his net worth by \$72 billion, there is a widespread desire among workers to fight for improved wages and working conditions.

There is a great variety of views among Amazon workers, however, about the unionization drive. Some hope the RWDSU will help them fight the giant corporation. Others, particularly those who have had experiences with unions, do not think conditions would change if the RWDSU was voted in.

“I do hope that because of the union,” Jennifer Bates, a worker who helped initiate the union drive at the Bessemer warehouse (BHM1), told *Elle Magazine*, “we will finally have a level playing field. I hope we will be able to talk to someone at HR without being dismissed. I hope that we will be able to rest more, that there will be changes in the facility to take some of the stress off our bodies. I’m hoping we get a living wage—not just [Amazon’s] minimum wage.”

“It’s going to be a tight vote, in my opinion,” Alisha, who has been working at BHM1 since the fall, told the *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV). She used a pseudonym to protect herself, as well as other

Amazon workers. “I feel like the people who are voting ‘Yes’ were more than likely promised things from the union. The majority of people I’ve talked to are expecting wage increases.

“Through my own experiences with Amazon I don’t believe they know how to handle certain situations, but I don’t believe a union would be ideal here.” She said, “It’s part of the union PR campaign. The union is claiming to have ‘built Bessemer,’ but this city is one of the parts of Birmingham hit the hardest by poverty.”

Alisha has young children, and she says she “can’t afford more deductions on my paychecks. ... We pay Bessemer taxes. If the union gets voted in, we will have to pay them as well.”

While she voted “no” for the RWDSU, Alisha says there is “so much” she would like to see change at Amazon. “The safety of employees is the main thing that really baffles me. I’ve never seen a billion-dollar company treat their employees like literal slaves. ... I started working at Amazon for the benefits, and honestly my 20-something body feels more like 52 years old.”

Nina, an Amazon worker at a facility in the San Francisco Bay Area, told the IAWV, “I truly believe in making Amazon a union. The workers, we have nobody on our side, and no one to hear our voices. We should be getting better pay, benefits and better advocacy for hearing our grievances.”

A worker from the company’s Las Vegas facility said, “I think Amazon needs to unionize. Individually they can just fire employees who don’t fit their needs or who questions them, but they can’t fire all of us.”

“I’ve worked at Amazon, Walmart and a lot of other big corporations,” said Trey, an Amazon worker from Baltimore. “When you meet workers and talk to them, you see that most of us are a paycheck away from

poverty. Workers are under desperation, and you [the companies] get the profit from the sweat off people's backs.

"Everything is so high, paying for a hospital visit or keeping your lights on. They get people under those circumstances and threaten you: 'listen to the status quo or lose your job.' Then workers think this is the norm, when you see so many crises." Trey continued, "But that is why these entities exist, to make you feel you can't fight back. You have a right to be safe, to make a decent living, you have to understand that.

"It is not clear what is going to happen with the vote in Alabama," Trey continued. "In my experience in the unions, I didn't feel any different. I didn't see the benefits. We didn't even get included in any meetings."

In an extraordinary intervention Sunday night, President Biden fully backed the unionization campaign and all but called on workers to vote the RWDSU in. This is not because Biden—who has served big business throughout his long political career—has suddenly decided to fight for workers' rights.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained, "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."

The growing militancy and political radicalization of workers has been expressed in the formation of rank-and-file committees by Amazon workers in Baltimore (BWI2), along with autoworkers, educators and other sections of the working class throughout the US and internationally.

Regardless of the outcome of the vote, Brian, a member of the BWI2 Rank-and-File Safety Committee,

encouraged workers at the Alabama Amazon facility and other warehouses to form rank-and-file committees. "Without the teachers, the nurses, the janitors, we can't operate. If the schools do not open, we can't go to work. So opening the schools is all about profit," Brian stated. "That is why it's important that we build rank-and-file committees in every business. You have a voice. We are here to encourage everybody to build rank-and-file committees."

Jordan, another member of the BWI2 Rank-and-File Safety Committee, explained from his experience, "Unionization is a no-no from the corporate perspective. Early on at BWI2, there was an effort to organize a union. Amazon is against the union, and I was shocked to see that Bessemer was doing this. I am sure there are mixed views on it. It doesn't necessarily change conditions when you join a union."

Pointing to the conditions workers confront, from the man-made disaster in Texas to the dangerous school reopenings, Jordan said workers are "one or two paychecks away from poverty and homelessness. They want you to bow down to the needs of capitalism.

We need to find ways to bind together across the board, industry to industry, across national borders, at all levels. That is what our rank-and-file committee is fighting to do. I don't feel confident a union is the way to go for us."

After becoming aware of the BWI2 Rank-and-File Committee established in December to organize against Amazon independently of the trade unions, Alisha, the worker from the Bessemer Amazon facility said, "I believe us employees should form our own independent committee like Baltimore."

The *World Socialist Web Site* and IAWV urge all Amazon workers to follow the lead of BWI2 workers, Alabama educators and many more by joining the fight to build rank-and-file safety committees at every warehouse in the US and around the world. Workers can submit this form to share your views on the unionization campaign, describe the conditions in your warehouse and get involved.



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