Congressional Democrats visit Alabama to promote union drive at Amazon

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Five US congressional Democrats visited the Amazon fulfillment center in Bessemer, Alabama, last Friday to encourage workers to join the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). A vote on union certification began at the facility on February 8, and workers have until March 29 to mail in their ballots, with the vote being tallied the day after. If the workers vote to certify the RWDSU, then the Bessemer site will become the first unionized Amazon workplace in the United States.

The congressional delegation was made up of US Representatives Andy Levin of Michigan, Jamaal Bowman of New York, Cori Bush of Missouri, Terri Sewell of Alabama, and Nikema Williams of Georgia. Bowman and Bush are members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and closely aligned with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and her "squad" of so-called progressive Democrats. Levin is the scion of a family of longstanding Democratic Party politicians with close ties to the United Auto Workers and the AFL-CIO.

The visit follows President Biden's extraordinary statement on February 28, in which he for all intents and purposes called on Amazon workers to vote for the union. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained, Biden, who has spent his entire political career serving the interests of corporate America, has not suddenly become "pro-worker." Instead, his endorsement was aimed at salvaging the RWDSU's effort to unionize the Alabama facility and using the unions to contain the growing militancy of the half-million US workers at the giant corporation, which plays a strategic role in the US and world economy.

"We see you, we hear you, Alabama workers, and we are with you," declared Sewell, who represents the congressional district that includes the Amazon facility, as she stood with her fellow Democrats and RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum at the rally last week. Levin added, "This is the most important election for the working class of this country in the 21st century. This is the biggest election in the South in a generation."

Like Biden, the speakers sought to present the Amazon workers struggle primarily as a racial issue, noting the majority black population in Bessemer and likening the union vote to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. "The world is watching Alabama once again," said Sewell. "Birmingham, Bessemer, it's so important that the world knows that once again Alabama is standing up for civil rights and human rights."

Bowman went even further, likening the unionization drive to the fight against slavery. "[Amazon has] created a plantation work environment that's abusive," he said. Bowman later tweeted a message to Jeff Bezos, in which he said, "Our fight isn't just about a higher wage. It's about restoring the dignity to work and giving labor a seat at the table, the same table you've sat at as you've decided to reduce your workers to chattel."

The promotion of racial politics by Bowman and the other Democrats is designed to conceal the fact that what workers at Amazon face are primarily class issues, not issues of race. The giant corporation and its billionaire owner profit from the capitalist system of wage slavery, not chattel slavery. Under this system, which is loyally defended by the Democrats and the unions, workers of all colors and nationalities are exploited for the profits of the private owners of the giant industries and banks like Bezos.

Bowman's disparaging remarks about higher wages are significant. Far from seeking the abolition of wage-slavery, the unions want a "seat at the table" to negotiate the terms of the exploitation of the working class and to get a cut from it in the form of union dues, seats on corporate boards and other bribes.

It is telling that neither the congressional Democrats nor Appelbaum nor any other union official made any concrete demands of Amazon during the event. The website set up for the unionization campaign in Bessemer only provides vague arguments for certification, claiming unionization would enable workers to "negotiate the highest safety standards and protocols," protect workers from arbitrary termination and institute specific procedures to have their grievances redressed.

This only underscores the fact that the union is being imposed from the top, not through an upsurge of rank-and-file workers who have made their demands for higher wages, better working conditions abundantly clear. If the RWDSU is brought in, it will immediately seek to stifle rank-and-file militancy and sign a deal that is fully acceptable to the corporate giant.

This has been the bitter experience of workers in the South

over the last two decades. In 2003, the UAW won representation rights at the Freightliner truck plant in Cleveland, North Carolina by means of an agreement with management to use the "card check" procedure, whereby union recognition is granted if a majority of workers in a bargaining unit sign an authorization form. Unknown to the workers, however, the UAW had signed a secret agreement with the company in 2000, pledging concessions in exchange for a neutrality agreement on unionization.

When the newly elected bargaining committee started negotiations for a new contract in 2007, it was not aware of the pre-conditions agreed to by the UAW in exchange for union recognition. With the company demanding an expanded two-tier wage structure, cuts to retiree health care, a pay freeze for the majority of workers and mass layoffs at the plant, the bargaining committee, which had attained a 98.4 percent strike authorization from the members, voted unanimously for strike action, and a walkout began on April 2.

Within a few hours, the UAW intervened to squelch the strike, bypassing the elected local leadership and accepted concessions, which had previously been rejected. When the membership voted down the contract, the UAW intervened to force a re-vote. After intense threats and browbeating of the membership, the union secured ratification on the second try. With the tacit agreement of the UAW, 11 members of bargaining committee were fired by the company, and another 700 workers who participated in the four-hour walkout faced disciplinary charges.

In June 2019, workers at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee rejected the UAW in a union recognition vote for the second time in five years. In 2014, the union was also defeated after workers learned that the UAW and the VW agreed to a neutrality pact in exchange for a sweetheart deal in which the union agreed to "maintaining and where possible enhancing the cost advantages and other competitive advantages [Volkswagen] enjoys relative to its competitors in the United States and North America."

Regardless of the outcome of the vote, workers at Bessemer and other Amazon facilities will still confront the challenge of building an independent organization, democratically controlled by the rank and file, to fight for their class interests. This includes breaking management's dictatorship, abolishing the rate system and constant monitoring by the bosses. It means the workers themselves must assert ever greater control over line speeds, working conditions, health and safety.

Amazon workers must unite with FedEx, UPS and US Postal Office workers to stop the relentless downward pressure Amazon has put on the wages of logistics workers. They must fight for a doubling of Amazon workers' pay, with full medical and retirement coverage.

Bessemer workers should join the growing national network of rank-and-file committees, including Amazon workers at the company's BWI2 fulfillment center in Baltimore, educators in Alabama, New York, California and other states, and autoworkers in Michigan, Indiana and Illinois.

At the same time, workers must maintain their complete political independence from both corporate-backed parties. Even when they could still win certain advances through the unions, largely through the mass struggles led by socialists and left-wing militants in opposition to the labor officials, the unions were incapable of organizing and improving conditions for workers in the South because of their political subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party.

By 1953, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) shut down "Operation Dixie," a campaign to unionize the South, because the CIO leaders did not want to encourage a political break by the working class against the Democratic Party, which was the party of Jim Crow segregation and lynch law in the Southern US states.

In preparation for its merger with the AFL in 1955, the CIO also carried out a vicious anti-communist witchhunt against left-wing unions like the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, which had a large base of support among militant workers, black and white, in the steel mills of Birmingham and Bessemer.

Biden's administration embodies the Democrats' decades-long abandonment of any connection to the social reforms of the New Deal era. Its promotion of racialist politics is aimed at covering up its anti-working class character.

It is noteworthy that Andy Levin, who led the congressional delegation in Bessemer, started his political career in the Clinton administration, which destroyed welfare benefits as a basic social safety net while deregulating the Wall Street banks. Levin served as a staff attorney for Clinton's Presidential Commission on the Future of Worker-Management Relations, which further integrated the unions into the structure of corporate management and the state as the ruling class offensive against the working class was intensified.

At an even more basic level, the promotion of the unions by the Democratic Party is aimed at building a firewall against socialism under conditions where millions are being radicalized under the impact of the pandemic. The ruling class rightly fears that conditions are being created for the emergence of a mass, socialist working class movement. This more than anything else is shaping the response by the Democratic Party to the vote in Bessemer.

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