

Wages and benefits for low-wage workers have fallen in Alabama during coronavirus pandemic

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Last month, the Adelante Alabama Worker Center (AAWC) published a survey under the title, “Working on the Edge: A Survey of Low-Wage Workers in the Birmingham Area Amid a Global Pandemic.” The survey brings to light the devastating impact which the coronavirus pandemic has had on low-wage workers in the state’s largest city—a glimpse into what millions of workers in the United States, and billions internationally, are facing.

Even before the pandemic, the state of Alabama was among the poorest in the country. For the city of Birmingham, the poverty rate was over 28 percent, one and a half times the state average. The study by the AAWC demonstrates how conditions in the city have deteriorated since.

The survey found substantial falls in income across all demographic groups. The largest percent decrease was among Hispanic and Latinos, whose wages fell by 9 percent to \$10.12. This is the result not only of the pandemic but of the malicious crackdown on immigrants, permitting companies to hyper-exploit undocumented migrant workers under threat of federal detention. Whites experienced the second largest decrease in hourly wages at 5 percent, from \$10.79 to \$10.24, and African Americans, who averaged the lowest in pre-and-post-pandemic wages, saw a 3 percent drop from \$10.39 to \$10.07.

Moreover, undocumented immigrants have reported by far the greatest decrease in wages pre-pandemic to current, dropping 18 percent from \$11.58 per hour to \$9.50.

The minimum wage in Alabama—along with South Carolina, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Louisiana—is the pathetic federal minimum wage of \$7.25, which has

remained unchanged since the beginning of the Democratic administration of Barack Obama in 2009.

The coronavirus pandemic, left unopposed on the local, state, and federal level, aided in part by the trade unions, has taken a tremendous toll on the working class in the state. More than 503,000 have contracted the disease and 10,237 have died as of this writing.

Moreover, notwithstanding the severity of the coronavirus pandemic, many low-wage workers lack quality health insurance, paid time off (PTO), unpaid time off, sick days, and time for quarantine. Over the course of the pandemic, 37 percent of respondents reported having coverage through either Medicaid or Medicare, while 32 percent reported their medical insurance was provided through their employer with nearly 5 percent reported being covered under a family member’s plan. However, the number of respondents without insurance increased by 2 percent from the beginning of the pandemic. Some 22 percent of respondents reported having no health insurance, rising to 75 percent for Hispanics and Latinos.

For many workers, COVID-19 has negatively impacted their workloads and, in some cases, the ability to work in general. According AAWC’s survey, more than 57 percent of respondents reported their scheduled work hours have been reduced due to the pandemic, while 23 percent reported reduced workloads. However, 19 percent of respondents noted increased workloads and 11 percent reported increased hours.

Workers laboring under these conditions risk not only contracting COVID-19 but retaliation from their employers. The AAWC further reported, “Employers retaliate against workers who take steps to protect their own health and the health of others by threatening to

call police or immigration officers, targeting workers or their coworkers with disciplinary action, and firing or suspending workers.”

Nearly 11 percent of workers received threats of termination if they did not show up to work. A further 11 percent reported they cannot work due to child and family responsibilities while 10 percent were terminated or laid off. Another 9 percent reported they were furloughed or forced to take unpaid leave. The majority of low-wage workers who responded to the survey, 56 percent, had also not received a stimulus check.

Approximately 37 percent of the 204 workers surveyed noted that their employers offer no paid time off, rising to 47 percent for Hispanic and Latino workers. Only three percent of Hispanic and Latino workers received paid time off. Only five percent of workers had access to paid parental leave.

In early March, just prior to the coronavirus pandemic, *Alabama Possible* conducted a “Barriers to Prosperity Date Sheet,” publishing its findings two months later on May 21. The report found that “more than 800,000 Alabamians, including 256,000 children, live below the federal poverty threshold, which is \$25,701 for a family of four.” Alabama is the fifth poorest state in the US, where 16.8 percent of Alabamians live below the federal poverty threshold. This is 3.7 percentage points higher than the national average of 13.1 percent. From their investigation to their publishing date, *Alabama Possible* also reported that more than 400,000 Alabamians have lost their jobs.

Founded in the wake of the American Civil War, the city of Birmingham quickly grew into an industrial powerhouse, becoming one of the nation’s leading producers of steel, iron and coal. The state’s and city’s wealth was built and produced by a heavily exploited working class drawn from former black slaves, immigrants, and impoverished white laborers. Birmingham’s history is rich in struggles for social and economic equality and it was a major center of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

The social disaster in the state, highlighted by the AAWC report, is producing growing opposition in the working class throughout the state. In the closing months of 2020, more than 400 aluminum workers at the Constellium plant in Muscle Shoals went on strike. However, the strike was isolated and sold out by the

United Steel Workers (USW). In Montgomery, Alabama public school teachers have organized sickouts to protest the premature reopening of school buildings and have formed an independent rank-and-file safety committee to oppose the betrayals of the Alabama teachers union.

In Bessemer, more than 5,800 workers at the BHM1 Amazon fulfillment are expected to conclude voting at the close of March on whether to certify the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union—affiliated with the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union—as their official bargaining agent. While there is no doubt that many Amazon workers are hopeful that by bringing in the union they will be better able to resist the world’s most powerful online retailer, the UFCW is notorious for its collusion with management in meatpacking plants around the country, including in Waterloo, Iowa where it collaborated with management at a Tyson pork plant to implement a perfect attendance bonus in the early stages of the pandemic. While management and the UFCW covered up infections in the plant, which eventually lead to six deaths, plant supervisors privately took bets on how many workers would eventually become infected.

The fact that not only President Biden, who is spearheading the reopening of major school districts and has not rescinded Trump’s executive order that meatpacking plants remain open, but also right-wing Republican senator Marco Rubio have publicly endorsed the unionization effort at Bessemer shows that the ruling class sees in the unions a reliable instrument for enforcing their policies on the working class.

Regardless of the outcome of the vote, the way forward for Amazon workers is the formation of independent rank-and-file committees to mobilize opposition to unsafe working conditions, whether enforced by Amazon by itself or with the assistance of the RWDSU.



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