

The unionization campaign at Amazon: A top-down operation, with no program for workers

Tom Carter, Jerry White
15 March 2021

Less than two weeks of voting remain for the 5,800 Bessemer, Alabama Amazon warehouse workers who are deciding whether to accept representation by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). More than 3,000 workers signed cards in favor of a union election in the period leading up to the vote, which began on February 8. Workers have until March 29 to mail in their ballots, with the tally to be announced the following day.

The campaign has been heavily promoted by the Democratic Party and its media affiliates nationwide, as well as by President Biden. But very little has been said of the concrete demands of Amazon workers at the Bessemer warehouse in any fight with management. This is because, in fact, there are none.

On Sunday, the *World Socialist Web Site* sent an email inquiry to the union, asking for a list of the demands the RWDSU has told workers it will fight for if it wins the vote. The response of Chelsea Connor, RWDSU Director of Communications, reads in its entirety, “That would be during contract negotiations, not during the union campaign.”

While the word “grassroots” is endlessly used to describe the unionization campaign at Bessemer, this Democratic Party buzzword has nothing to do with reality. The absence of any concrete demands around which workers are being mobilized underscores the thoroughly top-down character of the unionization drive.

There is no shortage of demands that could and should be raised. The *International Amazon Workers Voice*, initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site* in 2017, has been a focal point for growing anger among Amazon workers, including in response to the exposure of working conditions and the fates of injured workers by Amazon whistleblowers like Shannon Allen and Michelle Quinones.

There is broad support among Amazon workers to

abolish the oppressive rate system, which requires workers to perform a task as often as every six to nine seconds. The constant pressure to “make rate” is not only unsafe and physically exhausting. It is also degrading, demeaning, and injurious to workers’ mental health and well-being.

A popular phrase among Amazon workers is, “We are not robots!”

There is also powerful support for higher wages, the changes necessary to reduce injuries, adequate compensation for injured workers, and an end to the tyrannical surveillance regime that records and logs every second of a worker’s day.

During the pandemic, Amazon workers staged walkouts and demonstrations to demand countermeasures against the spread of the virus. Workers demanded up-to-the-minute information on infections in their workplaces. When management refused to provide that information, they organized on social media and collected it themselves.

When Amazon workers formed an independent rank-and-file committee in Baltimore in December (ignored by those tendencies now celebrating the efforts of the Democratic Party and the RWDSU in Bessemer), workers demanded an end to the abusive management speed-ups and the regime of harassment around so-called “time off task” (TOT). Workers also demanded the reinstatement of hazard pay, real scientific contact tracing, paid time off for sick workers, accessible coronavirus tests, and the closure of facilities for necessary cleaning.

Throughout history, serious working-class struggles have always been associated with a definite program to combat capitalist exploitation. This was certainly true in Bessemer and Alabama itself. In 1934-35 there was a wave of strikes by iron and steel workers, coal miners, railroad workers, rural sharecroppers, Birmingham laundry workers, Mobile dock workers, meatpacking

workers and others who fought for better wages and conditions, union recognition and an end the tyranny of management over the workers.

Many of these struggles, often led by socialists, united workers across racial lines during the heyday of Jim Crow segregation, raising political demands including government relief for the unemployed, the end to racial discrimination and anti-labor violence by the police and the KKK.

But RWDSU raises no demands and has no intention of waging a serious struggle on behalf of workers against Amazon. The last thing the RWDSU and the AFL-CIO unions want is a wave of strikes by Amazon workers, which would quickly inspire and draw in millions of other workers into struggle against the corporate and political establishment, which the unions are part of.

It is necessary to warn Amazon workers directly that, if brought in, the union will suppress workers' real demands for substantial improvements in wages and working conditions to reach an agreement that secures the RWDSU's own "seat at the table" with the giant corporation and an unending stream of dues money.

The RWDSU has called no strikes even when its members were literally killed on the job. Last April, after three workers at the Tyson's Camilla, Georgia plant died of COVID-19, the RWDSU kept its 2,000 members in the plant and did nothing but issue press releases imploring the company to be nicer. In Montgomery and other Alabama cities, the RWDSU's 7,500 poultry workers make miserable wages, in many cases less than the pathetic \$15 an hour Amazon pays.

Last week RWDSU officials publicly disavowed calls on social media for a one-week boycott of Amazon products to support the unionizing drive. Even this symbolic gesture was too much for the RWDSU.

Many Bessemer workers may hope that bringing in the RWDSU will strengthen them against this corporate giant. But they should ask themselves: If this was an organization that genuinely represented and fought for workers, why would it be getting the support of President Biden—a longtime shill of big business—and other Democratic politicians, who, no less than the Republicans, protect the interests of big business?

Even right-wing Republican Florida Senator Marco Rubio threw in his support last week, which the RWDSU enthusiastically accepted.

The ruling class fears a real struggle by Amazon workers in the US and internationally, leading to social eruptions that would threaten the entire capitalist system.

They are fearful of the growth of militancy among workers and the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the corporatist unions, by Baltimore Amazon workers, Alabama teachers and educators and autoworkers around the country.

From the standpoint of the ruling elite, the corporatist trade unions perform a valuable function, guaranteeing "labor peace" and policing the struggles of workers, restraining them within the framework of negotiations over contract terms and preventing them from presenting a challenge to the capitalist system itself.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* and the *International Amazon Workers Voice* explained, regardless of the outcome of the vote, workers at Bessemer and other Amazon facilities will confront the challenge of building an independent organization, democratically controlled by the rank and file, to fight for their class interests.

If the union is brought in, these rank-and-file committees, independent of the union, will have to fight for the demands workers need, not what the corporations, politicians and unions say they can afford. This should include a doubling of wages, fully paid medical and retirement coverage, and an end to the corporate dictatorship through workers' control over work rates, break times and health and safety.

These committees will fight to mobilize Amazon workers throughout the US and across the corporation's global empire, uniting with FedEx, UPS and US Postal Service workers to stop the relentless downward pressure Amazon has put on the wages of logistics workers.

The fight for the day-to-day needs of workers must be combined with a struggle to put an end to the source of their exploitation, the capitalist system which further enriched Bezos and other billionaire pandemic profiteers while 2.6 million people died from COVID-19, including nearly 550,000 in the US.

Instead, economic life must be organized along socialist lines so the vast wealth created by the collective labor of the working class, the "essential" element in society, can be used to meet social need, not the wealth of the oligarchs.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)