

Workers call for independent rank-and-file committees during forum on Amazon unionization vote in Alabama

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Amazon workers, educators, nurses and other workers participated in an online call sponsored by the *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV) on Sunday to discuss the unionization vote at the Amazon BHM1 Fulfillment Center in Bessemer, Alabama. Over 5,800 Amazon workers at the facility are holding a mail-in vote on whether to bring in the Retail, Warehouse and Department Store Union (RWDSU). The voting concludes March 29 with results set to be released the following day.

The IAWV was launched by the *World Socialist Web Site* in 2017 to assist Amazon workers in exposing the brutal working conditions they confront and encourage the formation of independent rank-and-file committees to unite and coordinate the struggles of Amazon workers in the US and internationally. The meeting was held jointly with the Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was recently formed at the BWI2 Fulfillment Center in Baltimore, Maryland to defend workers and oppose the lack of protection against COVID-19.

Kayla Costa, a writer for the WSWS and IAWV, chaired the meeting and the main report was given by Tom Carter, who has written extensively on the struggles of Amazon workers for the WSWS.

The IAWV was founded four years ago, Carter said, because "we recognized Amazon was a key battleground in the international class struggle." Carter explained that the corporate and political establishment feared the growth of militancy among Amazon workers who play a strategic role in the US and international economy. Because of this, Biden and the Democrats are promoting the corporatist unions, which have spent decades colluding with management and the government to suppress the opposition of the working class.

The "RWDSU is being brought in not because it will serve as a vehicle for fighting for workers' demands, but the opposite. Biden, the Democrats, Rubio, and the *New York Times* have thrown their support behind this drive because they see the unions as a method for capturing and controlling and ultimately suppressing workers' struggles."

While the IAWV defends the right of Alabama workers to vote however they choose in the election without Amazon's

interference, Carter said, "if the union is brought into Bessemer, workers will quickly find themselves in a struggle not just against the company, but against the union as well."

Regardless of the outcome of the vote, he said, "the most important task for Amazon workers is to build independent organizations controlled by rank-and-file workers with which they can fight for what they need and deserve, not what management, politicians and union officials say is affordable or acceptable."

The corporation had record sales throughout the course of the pandemic while placing its workers directly in harm's way, Carter continued. Since last March Amazon CEO and founder Jeff Bezos has added nearly \$80 billion to his personal fortune, making him the world's second wealthiest person. In October, Amazon admitted that at least 20,000 of its employees had contracted COVID-19, and this is "undoubtedly an undercount," Carter said.

The IAWV advances the demands workers need, including an end to the hated rate system, a 40 percent pay raise, the end of victimizations, full transparency about COVID-19 outbreaks and workers' control over rate speed and health and safety.

"There is plenty of money for all of these demands and more," Carter said. "Amazon can afford it, but they won't do it just because workers ask nicely. And these demands will not be won through the RWDSU, which has conspicuously failed to raise any demands that it promises to fight for."

He concluded, "Workers need to organize at the level of the warehouse floor, with organizations that they build and control themselves, completely independent from the Democrats, Republicans, and unions."

During the discussion, participants listened to and were shaken by the comments of former Amazon worker Christina Brown. In January, Christina's sister, Poushawn Brown, died in her sleep from unknown causes after contracting a headache during her shift at an Amazon logistics facility in the Washington D.C. suburb of Springfield, Virginia. Poushawn had been working at the DDC3 facility in the COVID-19 testing department, a job which she and her family had felt had placed her in danger of catching the virus.

“My sister passed away in late January and I reached out to Amazon for an autopsy and a burial fee. I was told [by Amazon] that they would get back to me. They never did,” Brown said. To this day, Christina has not been able to ascertain the exact cause of her sister’s death due to exorbitant fees being charged for an autopsy. She is now solely responsible for Poushawn’s 12-year old daughter as well as her own family.

Christina spoke about the struggles her family has faced since their loss. “The only thing that her daughter, my mother and I were offered was two months of grief counseling, which expires next week,” she said. “I don’t know if they [Amazon’s owners] have ever lost anyone, but some people need a lifetime of counseling” to recover from the loss of a loved one, she said.

Marc, a leading member of the Baltimore BWI2 Amazon facility rank-and-file safety committee, said Amazon’s safety procedures were “more like a public relations campaign... to make us feel like we’re working in safe conditions.”

He continued, “It amazes me how a multibillion dollar corporation can have a lot of unsafe conditions, unsafe equipment, broken down equipment, time and time again different tools we’re supposed to utilize; it just goes on and on,” he said. Marc encouraged workers to get in touch with the WSWS and the IAWV to help assist them in setting up rank-and-file safety committees.

Workers from multiple professions and backgrounds also spoke to their shared class experiences. Lisa, a nurse in New York City, spoke powerfully, declaring, “We must be a part of these rank-and-file safety committees because the unions cannot help us,” she said. “They want to straitjacket your struggle.” Lisa added that “the same Biden who says he wants a union at Amazon is the same person who said the fascists who wanted to trample on everyone’s democratic rights on January 6 were his ‘colleagues.’ These are the same people that are preparing for war internationally with China.”

In contrast to this sentiment of working class solidarity, the RWDSU and its parent organization, the United Food and Commercial Workers union, have forced workers to remain on the job even as their own members died from COVID-19 in the poultry and meatpacking plants.

A comment from an audience member doubted if one could “honestly say with any certainty” that the RWDSU would betray workers. In response, WSWS labor editor Jerry White explained that the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party’s position was based upon the “historical experiences of the working class in the United States and internationally over the past four decades.”

“When workers think of trade unions perhaps they envision organizations that unite them and resist the employers, gives them the means to fight for improved working conditions,” White said. In reality, this has “nothing to do with what the unions are today, or have been over the past 40 years.”

White referenced arguments made by former Bill Clinton

White House cabinet member Robert Reich at a congressional hearing held last week. A central claim of that hearing was that US workers have lost living standards mainly because of a decline in union membership since the 1970s. “What Reich didn’t say is that beginning in the late 1970s, the unions voluntarily cut wages” alongside the corporations. White pointed to the role of the United Auto Workers (UAW) whose leaders in 1979 were “placed on the board of directors of Chrysler during the first government bailout.” As a result, the auto company was allowed to shed jobs and cut wages by \$30,000 per year in inflation-adjusted dollars.

White noted that while previously unions colluded in cutting wages, now “they are giving up workers’ lives also. Why do you need to bring in an apparatus that is going to try to prevent the workers from fighting? Why not organize workers directly? That is what the IAWV and the Socialist Equality Party are seeking to do,” he concluded.

Michael Hull, a member of the Texas Educators’ Rank-and-File Safety Committee and founder of the “Teachers Against Dying” social media group, amplified these statements. Rather than uniting workers in one common struggle, the teachers unions were the “controlled opposition” of the corporations and businesses, he said.

“The union is supposed to fight against the elite. They’ve been grafted into the elite apparatus through the Democratic Party,” he said. Last week, Hull, a cancer survivor who was forced to leave his job rather than return to in-person learning as Texas reopens schools, confronted American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten in a public online forum over the union’s collusion in reopening the schools. In response the AFT leader declared, “We are not going to fight to keep the schools closed.”

“When Joe Biden starts talking about, ‘I’m going to support Amazon workers and unions’—watch out,” Hull warned Amazon workers. “We need an alternative... We need to take matters into our own hands as workers.”

The International Amazon Workers Voice encourages all logistics and Amazon workers interested in setting up independent rank and file committees to sign up and get in touch with us.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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