

Leading the Amazon unionization drive: RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum, a state operative

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With the deadline for the vote on the unionization of the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama only days away, the US trade unions, with the support of the Democratic Party and allied pseudo-left groups, are going all out to urge workers to cast a “yes” vote for representation by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU).

The unionization drive at Amazon takes place amid growing anger in the working class over the criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic by the ruling class and government that has cost more than 550,000 lives in the US. Amazon workers have been forced to work grueling schedules throughout the pandemic, while thousands of workers contracted the virus, with many succumbing.

Terrified of this anger and fearful of the prospect of the development of an independent movement of the working class outside the control of the trade unions and the Democratic Party, the AFL-CIO and even right-wing Florida Republican Senator Marco Rubio have thrown their support behind a top-down effort to impose the RWDSU on Bessemer Amazon workers.

The organization that Amazon workers are being asked to vote for is not a vehicle for carrying forward a struggle against the oppressive conditions at Amazon. It has time and time again shown itself to be a pliant tool of management that seeks to stifle and suppress resistance by workers to the horrific conditions they face.

A look at the background of RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum is instructive. He is a longtime state operative, deeply embedded in the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, including the overseas operations of the AFL-CIO conducted with the aim of subverting workers’ resistance to tyranny and oppression.

Appelbaum has served as RWDSU president since 1998 and also serves as an executive vice president of the United Food and Commercial Workers. He sits on the executive council of the AFL-CIO, where he is co-chairman the federation’s International Affairs Committee. He is also a

vice president of the New York State AFL-CIO and a member of its executive committee.

Highly placed within Democratic Party, he is a member of the Democratic National Committee where he serves on the DNC’s Executive Committee and is co-chairman of the DNC’s Resolutions Committee and is also chair of the DNC Labor Council.

The RWDSU website notes: “Appelbaum served as a delegate to the 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2020 Democratic National Conventions and an alternate delegate to the 1992 Democratic National Convention. He served as a member of the Electoral College from New York in 2008, 2016 and 2020.”

These connections further underscore the fact that the Amazon unionization drive in Alabama has very much the character of a state operation. This is not the first time Appelbaum has played such a role. According to a report in the *New York Times*, in 2011 the AFL-CIO called Appelbaum back from Tunisia to assist in a new assignment, an operation aimed at derailing the spreading Occupy Wall Street movement.

Noting the role of Appelbaum in 2011 as an AFL-CIO emissary to Tunisia following the toppling of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, WSWs writer David Walsh pointed to the role of various right-wing AFL-CIO labor fronts, including the notorious American Institute for Free Labor Development, in promoting the reactionary aims of US imperialism. This included the support for coups in Brazil, Chile and Argentina and the attempted subversion of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. A similar operation is now underway against the government of Venezuela.

Walsh wrote, “The AFL-CIO continues to run filthy operations around the world through such organizations as the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), or ‘Solidarity Center,’ 96 percent funded by the US government. The ACILS is a constituent element of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a conduit for

government funds that used to be funneled covertly from the CIA.”

Appelbaum sits on the board of Freedom House, a right-wing anticommunist group that served as a conduit for CIA propaganda during the Cold War. In 1988 Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman wrote in their book *Manufacturing Consent* that Freedom House “interlocks” with various ultraright outfits “and U.S. government bodies such as Radio Free Europe and the CIA.” It “has long served,” they wrote, “as a virtual propaganda arm of the government and international right wing.”

Also on the Freedom House Board of Trustees is Diane Villiers Negroponte, wife of John Negroponte, ambassador to Honduras during the 1980s. In that capacity he played a key role in overseeing the murderous CIA-backed “contra” operation against neighboring Nicaragua that claimed 50,000 lives.

According to the RWDSU, Appelbaum is also on the board of the Latino Victory Fund. He is an officer of two global union federations: IUF (International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations) and UNI (Union Network International).

In addition, he is president of UNI Global Commerce embracing 160 unions worldwide. Among other activities UNI Global has been active in soliciting multitrillion dollar investment funds to back the unionization drive at Amazon.

Appelbaum is the president of the Jewish Labor Committee, a pro-Israeli lobby within the American trade unions. In this capacity, he seeks to give a slightly “progressive” gloss to the ongoing Israeli oppression of the Palestinians.

His resume raises the question, what kind of genuine “workers organization” would tolerate such a figure as its leader?

The record of the RWDSU itself answers this. There is no indication that it has improved the lives of the oppressed and impoverished sections of the working class it organizes, including poultry processing workers in the US South. In many poultry plants, members of the RWDSU make even less than the paltry \$15 an hour paid by Amazon.

In a posting in April of last year reporting COVID-19 infections at poultry processing plants, the WWS noted, “The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) oversees barbaric conditions at Tyson factories in the US South. At the Tyson plant in Camilla, Georgia, three workers have died of COVID-19 infection. The plant appears to be the center of a coronavirus outbreak in the Albany, Georgia area, which leads the state in infections. As of this writing the plant was still in operation.

“A Tyson beef plant in Goodlettsville, Tennessee and

another Tyson poultry plant in Shelbyville are at the center of COVID-19 outbreaks in that state. The Goodlettsville facility employs about 1,600, and Shelbyville has about 1,000 workers. As of Monday, there were 79 cases at the Shelbyville plant and 120 at Goodlettsville.

“Workers described lax to nonexistent safety conditions inside the plants and a union that is in the pockets of management. The Shelbyville plant is set to close this weekend for three days for cleaning. Meanwhile, the RWDSU has praised Tyson for protecting workers while keeping the plant open.”

Speaking to *World Socialist Web Site* reporter Zac Corrigan, Chris, a former worker at the Tyson Shelbyville, Tennessee facility, said, “Most people there work over eight hours a day and night. There are no masks to protect us. There was no being six feet apart from people.

“They cook food for the workers there, and the people that cook it don’t wear masks over their faces.”

When asked about what measures the RWDSU and management were taking to protect workers, he said, “While I was there, they weren’t doing anything about it.”

The reality is that the unionization drive at Amazon in Bessemer is not a “grassroots” campaign arising from the workers but a top-down effort aimed at imposing a pro-company “union” that will maintain “labor peace” in the face of mounting opposition by Amazon workers to the conditions they face.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* and the *International Amazon Workers Voice* have explained, regardless of the outcome of the unionization vote next week Amazon workers face the necessity of building genuine, democratic workplace organizations to fight for their interests. The fight for workers’ basic demands, such as the right to a safe and healthy workplace, fully paid medical and retirement coverage and an end to poverty-level wages, poses a direct confrontation with the capitalist profit system.

The *International Amazon Workers Voice* and the Socialist Equality Party are leading the fight for the building of independent rank-and-file committees at schools, auto plants, logistics facilities and other workplaces across the US and internationally to conduct a unified struggle.

This is what the Biden administration and the supporters of the Amazon unionization drive fear above all and what they are seeking to forestall by imposing the RWDSU.



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