

Bernie Sanders promotes unionization at Alabama Amazon facility

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As balloting entered its final weekend, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders traveled to Bessemer, Alabama, on Friday to take part in a rally encouraging workers at the city's Amazon facility to vote to join a union.

Sanders is the latest in a series of prominent Democratic Party politicians, including President Joseph Biden, to promote the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), which seeks to establish a presence in Bessemer. While there will be many workers who vote in favor of the union, the campaign itself is a top-down operation, promoted not only by Sanders and the Democrats but anticommunist Republican Marco Rubio. Its aim is not to defend workers' rights but to bring in the union as a means of controlling and containing growing opposition among Amazon workers.

The RWDSU, which has worked hand-in-glove with meatpacking companies to keep their workers in the plants during the pandemic and whose President Stuart Appelbaum is a highly placed political operative with ties to the Pentagon, has not raised a single demand relating to working conditions in the warehouse as part of the unionization campaign. Sanders' appearance in the vote's crucial final stages reflects fears that the RWDSU union has been unable to make a significant appeal to workers during the campaign, making the outcome of the vote far from certain.

At the rally, RWDSU organizer Mike Foster used the language of morality and at one point invoked the Bible. He was the first to strike what became a recurring theme at the event when he said that workers needed "a seat at the table."

Following Foster at the podium, Amazon worker Linda Burns described the intolerable conditions familiar to all Amazon workers. She mentioned how few breaks workers are allowed and how little time

they have to go to the bathroom, which usually is a 10-minute walk from a worker's station. Although Burns is covered by a plan offered by Amazon, which the company describes as "good insurance," she nevertheless must pay significant out-of-pocket expenses to treat her injury. Because of Amazon's low wages, Burns was forced to find a second job. Despite this schedule, she somehow finds time to attend nursing school.

The next person to speak was rapper Killer Mike of the duo Run the Jewels. He began his remarks by describing himself as "south Negro rich" and admitting, "I got enough money to last me my lifetime." Coming immediately after Burns had described her need to work two jobs to make ends meet, these comments were remarkably tactless.

Continuing his racialist theme, Mike described Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos as "beyond white-folks-rich" and as belonging to the "planter class." Echoing Foster, he urged workers to vote for unionization because it will give them "an organized seat at the table." Near the end of his speech, Mike threatened to boycott Amazon if workers voted against the RWDSU.

Sanders's remarks were deceitful and thoroughly hypocritical. He roared that "the very, very rich are becoming much richer, while half of our people are living paycheck to paycheck and millions are working for starvation wages."

He failed to mention his own vote for the CARES Act, however, which he himself described as "corporate welfare" even as he promoted it. The act was the largest transfer of wealth to the financial oligarchy in history and provided utterly inadequate assistance to the unemployed and to workers who "are living paycheck to paycheck." Nor did Sanders mention his party's recent torpedoing of a provision to raise the

minimum wage in the bailout package passed earlier this year.

Sanders then inveighed against Bezos, pointing out that the latter was worth \$180 billion and had gained tens of billions of dollars in profit during the pandemic. He decried the efforts of Bezos and Amazon to defeat workers who want “decent wages.”

But in 2018, when Amazon raised its starting hourly pay from \$12 to \$15 (which is approximately its current level), Sanders had nothing but praise for Bezos. “Today I want to give credit to where credit is due, and I want to congratulate Mr. Bezos for doing exactly the right thing,” Sanders said in the Senate. Sanders even defended Bezos as it came to light that the wage increase was being offset by cuts to employee benefits, which in some cases resulted in a cut to total take-home pay for workers.

Sanders then took up the refrain of other speakers at the rally. “The union is not going to solve it all,” he said, “but what it does do is allow you a seat at the table.” This is an unintentionally revealing statement. By telling workers, “the union is not going to solve it all,” Sanders is advising them to lower their expectations.

Far from “solving it all,” for decades, the unions have forced through one concession after another, demanding only that the union officialdom be given a “seat at the table” in order that it can bargain concessions away, preserving the institutional interests of the union bureaucracy. If the RWDSU is voted in, it will immediately move to establish similar relations with Amazon management.

Sanders continued, “Years ago, people worked 50, 60, 70 hours a week with no benefits, and workers came together and demanded that they be treated with respect and dignity. And they formed unions.”

In fact, in the auto industry, which Sanders held up as a model union shop in a recent Senate hearing, the United Auto Workers long ago bargained away the eight-hour day and is collaborating to enforce not only 50-, 60- and 70-hour workweeks but even 80-hour workweeks. On April 5, skilled trades at Sterling Heights Assembly will begin a grueling 12-hour, seven-day workweek.

Voting at Bessemer ends on Monday, and the results are expected to be announced as early as Tuesday. Whatever the outcome is, Amazon workers cannot

defend their rights through the mechanism of the unions and the Democratic Party. They must instead mobilize their own independent strength through democratically controlled rank-and-file committees.



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