

On-the-spot report from Bessemer, Alabama

Amazon workers, residents speak out as union vote by Amazon workers concludes

Shelly Connor, Jerry White
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The vote by nearly 6,000 Amazon workers on the unionization campaign at the Bessemer, Alabama warehouse concluded on Monday. The results of the vote, which will determine whether the Retail, Warehouse and Department Store Union (RWDSU) is certified as the collective bargaining agent at the warehouse, are expected to be released by the National Labor Relations Board later this week.

A World Socialist Web Site reporting team spoke to Amazon workers at the warehouse Monday, along with other workers and residents at a nearby shopping area about the vote and broader issues facing workers.

“This is going to be a close vote,” a young woman worker who has been at the Bessemer warehouse for a year said. “About half of my co-workers are voting for the union and the other half are voting against it.” She said she had not voted yet and might not because of what she had learned from doing research on the unions. “I didn’t like what the unions in Detroit did, forcing autoworkers to have different wages scales, depending on seniority. That would not be good here. Getting in the RWDSU is going to be good for the unions but I don’t think it will be great for the workers.”

“The job is very draining. I work 36 hours straight and I sleep for most of my first day off. I feel bad because a lot of the workers here are older.”

Speaking about the public campaign to back the union by President Biden and other politicians, including Republican Senator Marco Rubio, she said, “With all these high-profile people backing the union like Danny Glover and Bernie Sanders you have to wonder who it will benefit.”

“I voted for the union,” another young worker said. “There has to be a fight. Fifteen dollars an hour is not enough, especially for the work we do.” He said that he

had not spoken to a lot of other workers and was not sure how they would vote.

Several workers who spoke to WSWs reporters said they had not voted and were not enthusiastic that things would change, regardless of the outcome of the vote. They said the union campaign did not emerge out of any upswell of enthusiastic support from below. “The first I heard about the union was when we got called into meetings with the managers to discuss it. I got several calls from the union too, but I don’t think they are going to make any change.”

A forklift driver at the Amazon facility for a year said she was not confident that unionizing the warehouse would change things. “I have children and grandchildren, so this is not the only job I have. Most of the people at Amazon work one or two other jobs. Standing for 12 hours a day is hard, especially for the older ones. If you are a picker, you have to keep up or they let you go.”

When told about the death of Poushawn Brown, a COVID-19 tester at a Washington, D.C. area Amazon facility, she said, “How could they say she didn’t get it from Amazon? The whole plant here got COVID-19, including me.”

The reporting team passed out copies of the International Amazon Workers Voice newsletter featuring the statement, “The class issues behind the unionization drive at Amazon.” The statement explained that the campaign to bring the RWDSU in at Amazon arises not from a rank-and-file rebellion of the working class, but from strategic calculations of the American ruling class.

With social anger over the deaths of more than half a million people reaching a breaking point, the Biden administration, the Democrats and sections of the Republicans are aggressively pushing the unions, the statement explained, because the unions are “key

instruments of class rule, defenders not of workers, but of the capitalist system. They work, not to organize workers against management, but to organize management against the workers.”

Whatever the outcome of the vote, the statement concluded, Amazon workers in Bessemer and other facilities will still be confronted with the need to build new organizations of struggle, independent of the corporatist unions, to fight for their needs. “Where the unions promote corporatism and class collaboration, workers need an anti-capitalist perspective. Where the unions promote national chauvinism, working class internationalism is needed. Where the union proceeds from what management is willing to part with, workers must proceed from what they urgently require,” the statement explained.

It concluded by urging Bessemer workers to join the growing network of rank-and-file committees built by workers at the Baltimore Amazon facility, among educators in Alabama and other states and autoworkers.

When reporters explained to the Amazon forklift driver that the IAWW was against both the company and the union, and that workers needed their own rank-and-file committees to fight for the rights of workers, her face lit up and she said, “That’s what we need.”

The reporting team also spoke to residents of Bessemer, an impoverished suburb of Birmingham, which was once a major center of the steel, coal and iron ore industry. By the mid-1980s, unemployed workers constituted one-third of the city’s workforce. After decades of deindustrialization, aided and abetted by the United Steelworkers, the United Mine Workers and other unions, more than 27 percent of the city’s population was living below the poverty line before the pandemic hit and it ranked first in the United States for violent crimes for cities with 25,000 or more residents.

A young woman who had worked at Amazon for a month said, “They get you with the \$15 an hour wage and you don’t realize what the conditions are going to be. The pay ought to be higher for what they want you do. When I was there, workers were passing out on the stairs because they were so tired, they were literally falling asleep on their feet. We would start at 6:15 pm and come home at 5:30 am. My mental health suffered because I stood in the same place for 12 hours, packing. When I told management, they moved me, but they sent me right back after two hours.

“They will write you up for something without even notifying you. Then when you request a day off, they tell

you sorry, you’ve already been written up. After a month, I said screw it because my mental health was deteriorating.”

A health care worker whose grandson works at Amazon said she supported the union drive. “My husband is a postal worker and the union helped him.” When asked about the RWDSU not even issuing demands for the workers who make low wages, she acknowledged that the unions did not fight like they did many decades ago.

A worker at the Mercedes-Benz plant in Vance, Alabama said, “The conditions at my plant are even worse than Amazon. A co-worker went to medical because he wasn’t feeling well. They sent him home. He collapsed in the parking lot and died. They only found him because of the GPS on his phone. The company wouldn’t say it was COVID-19. Two months before that, another man was sick and they sent him home. He died in his car and they didn’t find him until 3:30 the next morning.”

Aaron, a truck driver, commented on the billions that Amazon owner Jeff Bezos had made during the pandemic, while more than 20,000 Amazon workers were infected. “What are they going to do with all that money, take it with them when they die? They make so much money, but they won’t take care of their workers. COVID-19 shows just how much these big owners care about us.

“Whether its Trump or Biden, they are all on the same team, and it’s a lose-lose situation for the workers. We have to stand up and fight. There were big protests over the death of George Floyd, and it was young people of all races.

“They say, ‘Black Lives Matter,’” Aaron said, “But all lives matter. There are plenty of poor white people in Alabama. This isn’t about race. If it weren’t for the working people, the truck drivers, the Amazon workers, the teachers, the nurses, the rich wouldn’t have anything. Instead of some people making billions and others having nothing, everybody should be living the same way.”



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