

# The RWDSU's debacle at Amazon

Tom Hall, Joseph Kishore  
10 April 2021

The crushing defeat for the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) at Amazon's Bessemer, Alabama plant exposes the extent of workers' alienation from the pro-corporate trade unions.

In a facility with 5,800 workers, only 738 (less than 13 percent) voted for the union. The turnout for the vote was approximately 50 percent, and less than one-third of the votes that were cast went for the RWDSU. The results demonstrate that the campaign waged by the RWDSU did not reach the workers, who were either hostile or indifferent.

The RWDSU is predictably attempting to explain its debacle by citing company intimidation. RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum declared that workers were afraid that "they would lose their jobs if they voted for the union." He said that Amazon worked "very, very hard to get a very strange mailbox on their property" to collect the votes, and that the company said that the deadline for voting was earlier than it actually was.

Appelbaum's explanation is absurd on its face. First, no genuine workers organization expects that its efforts will have the support of the company. The industrial unions were built in the United States as mass organizations under conditions in which the employers resorted to massacres, the Ku Klux Klan, Pinkertons and other vigilante groups to defeat insurgent workers. Alabama was itself the scene of violent class battles against the determined resistance of the capitalist ruling elites.

Compared to what the unions confronted in an earlier period, the conditions in which the Bessemer vote was held were practically idyllic. The vote on the RWDSU had the support of dominant sections of the state apparatus and the media, including dozens of members of Congress and the explicit endorsement of the president of the United States, Joe Biden.

Appelbaum's claim, moreover, that the RWDSU could only get 13 percent of workers to support the union campaign because Amazon put a "strange mailbox" on their facility is an explanation that could only be given by wealthy executives with no connection to the working

class and the class struggle. As for the assertion that Amazon misled workers into voting earlier than they had to, this cannot explain the abysmally low turnout of only 50 percent. If anything, it would have produced the opposite result.

What are the real reasons for the defeat? We might suggest to Appelbaum that he look to the forty years of unending betrayals by the AFL-CIO, dating back to the refusal of the unions to defend the PATCO air traffic controllers against the Reagan administration's strikebreaking in 1981; the endless series of concessions contracts, in which the unions sanctioned wage and benefits cuts and job losses; and the transformation of the unions themselves into instruments of corporate management, a labor police force, staffed and led by highly paid executives, including Appelbaum himself (income \$344,464).

The campaign to install the RWDSU at Amazon did not arise from a movement of workers from below. Rather, it was an operation of the AFL-CIO, the ruling class and the state from above. The intervention of the Democratic Party and Biden reflects calculations within substantial sections of the ruling class that the working class can be better restrained by placing it under de-facto state guardianship within the unions.

The union advanced no demands related to compensation or working conditions. It could not make any demands, because to do so would mean to forfeit the support of the Democratic Party, along with sections of the Republican Party like the fascistic Florida Senator Marco Rubio, who endorsed the unionization drive in March. The only concrete result for workers of bringing in the RWDSU would mean the additional subtraction of union dues from their poverty-level paychecks.

The RWDSU did everything that it could to dissociate itself from working class militancy. Its plans, had it won the election, would have been to bind and gag workers through the National Labor Relations Board and arcane US labor law, while it pushed through a sellout contract that it likely already had in its back pocket.

The RWDSU campaign generated far more enthusiasm within privileged layers of the upper middle class, articulated by publications like *Jacobin* and *Left Voice*, than it did from Amazon workers. The unions provide for them a mechanism for achieving “labor peace,” reconciling their desires for minor reforms within the existing capitalist system with the rising stock market.

These pseudo-left organizations are now bemoaning the result of the vote. They have also helped the Democrats and the union present the campaign in primarily racial terms, as a continuation of Black Lives Matter.

This racist appeal, however, fell on deaf ears in the predominantly African American workforce. In fact, press interviews with Amazon workers, expressing opposition towards the attempt to present their plight in purely racial terms, suggest that it may have even backfired spectacularly. Many workers no doubt saw such a perspective as serving only to divide them in the face of a company with a global workforce of 1.2 million people of all races and nationalities.

The vote at Bessemer is not only a debacle for the RWDSU and the AFL-CIO, it is a debacle for the Democratic Party and all the middle-class organizations that surround it. The fact that the direct intervention of Biden in the vote either had no impact or led to *decreased* support for the RWDSU demonstrates how alienated the entire political establishment is from the working class.

There is enormous and growing social opposition in the working class. Among Amazon workers, there is mass hostility to conditions of extreme exploitation. The impact of the ruling class response to the pandemic, which has led to the deaths of more than 570,000 people in the US alone, has had a far-reaching impact on the consciousness of an entire generation of workers and young people, exposing the brutal and irrational nature of the capitalist system.

Even during the Bessemer vote itself, significant strikes were begun throughout the country by graduate students, nurses, steelworkers and, only a few miles away from Bessemer, Alabama, coal miners. In every case, the unions have worked to isolate and defeat the aspirations of workers. The Warrior Met miners in Alabama yesterday voted overwhelmingly, by 1,006 to 45, to reject the sell-out contract that the United Mine Workers sought to ram through.

What the Bessemer vote demonstrates is that workers do not see the unions as instruments for advancing their interests. What are called “unions” are not working-class organizations. They are organizations that represent an

upper middle-class stratum, entirely tied to management and the capitalist state.

Workers must draw the necessary conclusions from this experience. Above all, the rejection of the RWDSU points to workers’ need for alternative organizations to the pro-corporate trade unions that are genuinely democratic and responsive to their needs and not dominated by a bureaucratic clique.

The AFL-CIO and its affiliates—which are, collectively, multi-billion dollar corporate enterprises staffed by tens of thousands of highly paid executives whose compensation places them in the wealthiest 10 percent, and, in many cases, the top 5 percent of the population—cannot be transformed into instruments of the class struggle.

The task of socialists is not to serve as apologists and propagandists for organizations that are tied to the capitalist state and the corporations, and from which the working class is deeply alienated.

Rather, socialists must assist workers in creating new and democratic organizations of class struggle, which they control and which are responsive to their interests.

That is why the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site* advocate and are assisting workers in forming a network of independent rank-and-file committees in factories, schools and all work locations.

The development of a network of rank-and-file committees, in the United States and throughout the world—to which socialists must impart a revolutionary internationalist and anti-capitalist perspective—is critical to the development of the working-class counteroffensive against the ruling class and the entire capitalist system.

*For help forming a committee at your workplace, contact the World Socialist Web Site by filling out the form at [wsws.org/workers](https://www.wsws.org/workers).*



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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