

Left Voice on the RWDSU debacle at Amazon: A lawyers' brief for union executives

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After a lengthy campaign, backed by President Biden and substantial sections of the political establishment and corporate media, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) received only 738 votes in favor, or less than 13 percent of the 5,800 workers at the Bessemer, Alabama, Amazon warehouse.

The humiliating rejection of the RWDSU by Amazon workers has produced a wave of rationalizations and apologetics from the pseudo-left attorneys for the RWDSU executives.

Among those seeking to salvage the credibility of the RWDSU is *Left Voice*, which is affiliated with the Socialist Workers Party in Argentina (Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas-PTS). Over the past several months, *Left Voice* has sought to portray the RWDSU campaign as a “historic opportunity” for the working class throughout the country.

In its April 8 article, “Amazon Bullied and Bribe Their Way to Anti-Union Votes, But It’s Not Over,” *Left Voice* now shifts to describing the campaign as a valiant but failed effort against overwhelming odds. “From the outset, the organizing drive was a David-versus-Goliath story—and the Amazon Goliath used every legal mechanism in its arsenal.”

What were the main elements in this contest between David and Goliath? Amazon, it states, “invested in an epic anti-union campaign, spending more than \$10,000 a day to stop the unionization effort.” However, if the corporate behemoth with a market capitalization of \$1.7 trillion only spent \$10,000 a day—the equivalent of a mere three shares of Amazon stock, selling for approximately \$3,400 each—that would indicate that Amazon owner Jeff Bezos and the rest of management were not particularly alarmed by the RWDSU campaign.

As for the supposed “David” in this “David vs. Goliath” narrative, the AFL-CIO is a multi-billion-dollar business, controlling vast investment and pension funds. Had the Retail Workers union equaled Amazon’s anti-union budget, the cost of a six-month campaign would have been \$1.8 million, which is precisely \$100,000 less than annual combined salary of RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum and the union’s next eight highest paid bureaucrats. The union disburses another \$6 million annually to the rest of its staff.

The central action by Amazon cited by both the RWDSU and *Left Voice* that supposedly determined the outcome was the installation of a mailbox on company property, which workers could use to submit their ballots, though they did not have to do so. “This mailbox,” *Left Voice* writes, “installed in the dead of night, was central to Amazon’s union busting strategy. Amazon wanted to make employees bring ballots to work so that they could pressure and monitor employees to submit ‘no’ votes. The mailbox was removed right after the union election.”

That the RWDSU invests this mighty mailbox with such awesome power only exposes the pathetic character of its own campaign.

The history of violent class struggle in America

The gist of *Left Voice*’s argument is that the RWDSU lost the vote because Amazon opposed the union. It was not enough that President Biden and Senator Rubio endorsed the union. The victory of the RWDSU presumably required the support of Jeff Bezos as well.

The cowardly bureaucrats and their toadies from *Left Voice* crying about the “brutal” anti-union campaign have never been involved in a real labor struggle—as opposed to the top-down operation to install the RWDSU at Amazon—and have no idea what real class struggle in the US looks like. The history of the American labor movement, from its earliest days, has been marked by state-corporate violence.

During the 1870s, the Molly Maguires in the coal fields of Pennsylvania faced arrest and execution at the hands of the Coal and Iron Police. The struggle for an eight-hour day and was met with brutal reprisals, including the Haymarket massacre of 1886. The formation of the mass industrial unions in the 1930s and 1940s was waged in the face of industrial spies, the firing and blacklisting of militants, the massacre of striking workers by hired gun thugs and state militias and the frame-up and murder of union organizers.

In Alabama, miners, steelworkers, sharecroppers and others, from the 1870s to the 1960s, faced the violent resistance of the employers, the state and the Ku Klux Klan in their battles to organize.

In *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression*, Robin D.G. Kelley explains how Birmingham’s industrialists controlled settlements of company-owned housing in steel and mining towns that were “structured along the lines of an armed camp.” These settlements were “intended to insulate workers from outside influences, namely labor organizers. Employers maintained a private police force, paid spies to collect information and monitor workers’ activities, and employed every available means to create an impenetrable shield around the community.”

Kelley describes the persecution of the members of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers during the 1934 strike against the US Steel-owned Tennessee Coal and Iron Company (TCI) and other Birmingham area steel companies.

“Prodded by rank-and-file committees [led by Communist Party members], local Mine Mill leaders issued a strike call in May 1934 to ore miners at TCI, Republic Steel Corporation, the Sloss-Sheffield Iron and Steel Company, and the Woodward Iron Company demanding higher wages, shorter hours, and union recognition. The companies refused to arbitrate and responded by firing and evicting dozens of union members [from company owned housing]. Violence between strikers and company police left two strike breakers dead and at least nine workers wounded.

Despite the intervention of state troops, bombs exploded and gunfire was exchanged intermittently throughout most of the summer.

“Through the intervention of Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, an agreement between Mine Mill and TCI was finally reached on June 27, though it was hardly a victory for the union. Mine Mill remained unrecognized, and wages increased only slightly.”

Kelley also describes the 1934 strike of cotton pickers led by the Sharecroppers Union (SCU) to demand a dollar raise per hundred pounds: “In Lee County, police arrested seven union members for distributing strike leaflets, and in Tallapoosa vigilantes shot a least three strikers, including a woman [Communist] Party organizer. Pinned to the doors of several suspected strikers was the following message: ‘WARNING: TAKE NOTICE. If you want to do well and have a healthy life you better leave the Share Croppers Union.’”

KKK violence continued into the 1960s and was employed both against the civil rights and the labor movement.

David North, in his 1972 pamphlet, “Where Wallace Really Stands,” describes the violence directed at the working class movement by the state’s governor, George Wallace.

While Wallace’s reign of terror began against black leaders and civil rights workers, which culminated in the murder of Viola Liuzzo on an Alabama highway by three members of the Klan, North notes: “Another aspect of this terror which is rarely discussed was its use against the Alabama labor movement. Wallace increased the size of the state highway patrol which was led by Al Lingo, a supporter of the Klan. One of its principal functions was the criminal harassment of union organizers.”

A trade union official who participated in a 1965 organizing drive told North: “While we were organizing Black workers, the union hall was frequently harassed. Police would ride around it. One time we feared that a bomb had been placed in a car of an organizer. The state police wouldn’t even check the car. I called the Governor and asked if a union man doesn’t have protection for his life. All this racism was used to keep unions weak; to make it so that if you signed up a white, you couldn’t sign up a black, and vice-versa.”

The reactionary racist appeal of *Left Voice*

The RWDSU faced nothing like the conditions that existed in Alabama 50 years ago.

In continuing its lawyers’ brief for the RWDSU, *Left Voice* then argues that “Alabama is a deep red, right to work state, which proliferates anti-union propaganda regularly” and therefore “was an unlikely place to successfully take on the Amazon Goliath.”

However, the 7th Congressional District of Alabama, which includes Bessemer and other predominantly African American neighborhoods in and around Birmingham, is hardly a center of Republican “right to work” propaganda. Indeed, the district is one of only 11 in the country that were so uncompetitive in the 2020 election cycle that the Republican Party did not even bother to field a candidate. It is one of only three such districts in the US South. In the presidential election, Biden won by 70 percent. Given the fact that the majority of workers at Bessemer are African American, there is no doubt that most of those who voted in the elections voted for Biden.

Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that the RWDSU and AFL-CIO selected the Bessemer plant. However, they did not direct their appeal to workers on a class, but rather a racist basis. “With support weakest among young Black men in the plant many are hoping that the Black Lives Matter movement can get younger Black activists more engaged on their behalf,” one ally of the AFL-CIO wrote in the Pay Day Report.

Left Voice played a leading role in seeking to frame the union campaign in racial terms, as an extension of “Black Lives Matter.”

In its March 7 article, “Battlefield Bessemer,” *Left Voice* wrote, “This unionization struggle is a direct product of the Black Lives Matter movement. The movement, alongside the devastation of the coronavirus pandemic, laid bare all the injustices of racist capitalism. Those who mobilized over the summer declared in no uncertain terms that Black people deserve better. Black lives should matter. But they don’t matter to the cops who systematically terrorize and murder Black people. And Black lives don’t matter to Amazon either.”

This tactic backfired, however, as workers in the region have a long experience with the reactionary role of the politics of racial division.

After the laundry list of lawyers’ arguments on behalf of the RWDSU, *Left Voice* then turns to blaming the supposed backwardness of workers. It quotes a RWDSU flunkey denouncing the younger workers at the Bessemer warehouse: “They don’t know anything about a union so [Amazon] can feed them anything and they’ll just eat it up.” According to the upper-middle class hacks who write for the *Left Voice*, the workers are simply not worthy of the RWDSU.

The real problem for the RWDSU was not that the workers knew little about the union. Rather, they knew too much.

No program, no workers

The RWDSU never issued a single demand for improved wages and working conditions, which itself branded the campaign as a top-down operation. In all the great organizing campaigns of the past, the fight for union representation was clearly linked to specific demands related, at the very least, to such basic issues as wages, the length of the work week, line speed, safety and job security.

But the RWDSU advanced no demands, because to do so would have cost it the support of the Biden administration and the Democratic Party. Moreover, there is nothing more frightening to the high-paid executives of the RWDSU (President Stuart Appelbaum 2020 salary: \$344,464) than a militant upsurge of the working class.

One Amazon worker interviewed by the *New York Times* explained that she did not vote for the RWDSU because when a representative called her about the vote, “he couldn’t answer a pointed question about what the union could promise to deliver. ‘He hung up on me,’ she said. ‘If you try to sell me something, I need to be able to sell that product.’”

The fact that the RWDSU had almost no contact with workers has been substantiated in a series of articles after the defeat. Jane McAlevey of the *Nation*, a supporter of the campaign, wrote, “The results were not surprising, however, for reasons that have more to do with the approach used in the campaign itself than any other factor.”

From the beginning, she writes, the RWDSU did not even know how many workers were in the warehouse when it filed for a union election in November 2020. It assumed there were 1,500 workers, not 5,800. The RWDSU did not send organizers to workers’ homes, and the primary way it sought to make contact with workers was having unions across the country phone them. RWDSU organizers outside the plant gates handing out leaflets could not find any pro-union Bessemer workers to appeal to their coworkers as they were driving out. “Instead, what workers saw was the paid staff of the union and outside supporters,” McAlevey writes.

The union could not produce photos or a public poster, flyer or website that displayed the signature or faces of workers stating their intent to vote yes—because it had none.

The RWDSU used celebrities to make public statements, inviting Bernie Sanders in to speak. The Sanders rally in Birmingham on March 26 was a

flop that brought virtually no one. In an earlier article, *Left Voice* itself acknowledged that “Sanders came to town and spoke to a crowd of mostly press, and local activists. Of the 5,800 who work at the fulfillment center, only 10–15 workers were at the event; some of them heard about the rally after the fact.”

Left Voice’s “rank-and-file” fraud

After covering for the RWDSU debacle, *Left Voice* proceeds to put forward a “left” critique. They complain that “the RWDSU leadership should have run a better unionization campaign” and criticize it for failing to establish greater contact with workers. “During the decades of neoliberalism, the tradition of militant unionism was lost, and many union bureaucrats have led unions to become tools of the bosses to keep their workers under control. Building a more combative labor movement requires the self-organization of the rank and file.”

“Unfortunately,” they write, the RWDSU did not take any “concrete measures to organize workers in rank-and-file assemblies to strategize and decide on the direction and future of the struggle.” Workers at the fulfillment center “had little or no contact with the union beyond a few text messages and a phone call... This was a fatal mistake.”

Left Voice never bothers to ask, let alone answer, the question as to why the AFL-CIO operates as a “business union,” because to do so would expose the bankruptcy of their own perspective. The defeat of the RWDSU at Amazon is the product of forty years of unending betrayals by the AFL-CIO, dating back to the deliberate isolation of the PATCO air traffic controllers who were fired by Reagan in 1981. The executives of the AFL-CIO have transformed themselves into arms of corporate management, profiting off of the exploitation of workers as they have imposed concession contract after concession contract.

To bring these organizations into workplaces will only serve to place a straitjacket on the development of genuine rank-and-file organizations, subjecting workers to the array of labor laws that sanction the union as the “sole legitimate representative” of the workers. The only direct outcome of bringing in the RWDSU or any organization in the AFL-CIO into Amazon would be that workers would be paying dues to an organization over which they have absolutely no control.

Left Voice is well aware of the growing influence of the Socialist Equality Party among Amazon and other workers. Like the trade union executives they serve, they see the development of a network of rank-and-file committees, not controlled by the AFL-CIO, as a serious danger.

In an acknowledgment of the support for independent organizations, *Left Voice* even calls for the formation of “rank-and-file committees,” but their purpose is the exact opposite of genuinely independent workers organizations. Referring to the union drive, they write in their April 11 article, “Bessemer Union Falls Short, But United Rank-and-File Workers Can and Will Win at Amazon,” that “Rank-and-file committees could have organized and held mass rallies throughout the area—and called on workers from other unions to join them—where they explained what unions are, why they’re important, and the tremendous gains they’ve won for workers in this country.”

In other words, the “rank-and-file committees” *Left Voice* is seeking to build are committees of middle-class pseudo-lefts whose main job is to lie to workers, cover up the real role of the unions and try to contain the rebellion of workers against these organizations.

In return for its services in bolstering the unions, the forces around *Left Voice*—along with *Jacobin* magazine, the Democratic Socialists of America, etc.—seek opportunities for themselves. They hope to serve as middlemen between the wealthy executives in the headquarters of the

AFL-CIO and workers who look on with hostility at the corporatist organizations in the employ of management.

In Argentina, the PTS, with which *Left Voice* is affiliated, has positions in the leadership of the Argentine teacher unions, where they have played a critical role in suppressing opposition to the reopening of schools as the pandemic spreads.

The way forward for Amazon workers

The various organizations promoting the RWDSU at Amazon could never explain why the campaign they backed also had the support of dominant sections of the ruling class political establishment, including not only the president of the United States, Biden, but also arch-reactionaries like Republican Senator Marco Rubio.

Biden’s aggressive intervention on behalf of the unionization campaign, including a video all but calling on workers to vote “yes,” expresses definite strategic considerations. The response of the ruling class to the pandemic has led to the deaths of more than 580,000 people in the United States alone. This, combined with the massive growth of social inequality and the disastrous situation facing millions of workers, is having a profoundly radicalizing impact on the consciousness of workers and youth.

A significant section of the ruling class sees in the AFL-CIO and the corporatist organizations within it a critical instrument for smothering social opposition. Under conditions of increasing militarist provocations directed at Russia and China, moreover, the ruling class sees in the unions an instrument for subordinating the working class to the war plans of American imperialism.

For Bezos, his concern is not that bringing in the AFL-CIO at Amazon would lead to pressure for increasing wages. After all, the workers under the control of the unions in other companies often make less even than at Amazon. Rather, he would be concerned that the union could be used as a mechanism for exerting pressure on behalf of Amazon’s competitors or subordinating his own business interests to the geopolitical imperatives of the ruling class as a whole.

To develop its own counteroffensive against the ruling elite, the working class requires its own organizations—that is, a network of rank-and-file committees that will unite workers at individual workplaces, across industries and sectors, throughout the US and internationally.

Even as the Amazon vote failed disastrously, there are significant expressions of working class opposition throughout the US. Only 25 miles southwest of Bessemer, 1,100 miners at Warrior Met Coal in Brookwood, Alabama, are continuing their strike after rejecting a sellout agreement between the company and the United Mineworkers of America (UMWA). In recent weeks, there have been significant struggles by steelworkers, autoworkers, graduate students and health care workers.

This is only the beginning of an upsurge of working-class struggle throughout the country and around the world. The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* are assisting workers in forming a network of independent rank-and-file committees in factories, schools and all work locations. Our call for rank-and-file committees today is a development of the struggle to free the working class from the existing structures and rebuild the workers’ movement on the basis of an international and revolutionary socialist program.

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



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact