Amazonians United: A new trap for workers

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Last month, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) lost its unionization vote at the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama by a more than two-to-one margin. The RWDSU, which relied on the backing of the Biden administration, Democratic members of Congress and even right-wing Republican Senator Marco Rubio, was incapable of generating any significant support from workers.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained in a number of articles analyzing the RWDSU union drive, from the outset the effort was a top-down operation, an initiative of the Democratic Party and AFL-CIO, rather than an expression of workers' opposition from below. The Democrats have made a calculated decision that the unions, having proven themselves reliable caretakers of corporate interests, must be provided further institutional support, so they may better serve as a brake on the class struggle and keep it from developing in a more radical, socialist direction.

Simultaneous with and complementing the White House-directed unionization drive, a subtler approach is being pitched by sections of the union apparatus and their middle-class allies, one which falsely presents itself as "worker-led," but which is no less beholden to the Democratic Party, the AFL-CIO and the capitalist state.

In the aftermath of the RWDSU debacle, a number of commentaries in the mainstream press have pointed to the "shift in strategy" being discussed. An April 9 article in the *New York Times*, titled "Union Loss May Bring New Phase of Campaign Against Amazon," cites union official advocates who say they plan to "step up their informal efforts," such as rallies and other public protests, in lieu of a focus on official union recognition votes, combining these moves with PR campaigns, celebrity endorsements and concerted political pressure to force Amazon "to the bargaining table."

The *Times* cites Ruth Milkman, director of the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies, who refers to this unionization approach as the "ground war" and the "air war." This strategy was utilized by the Service Employees International Union in unionizing sections of janitors and fast-food workers, who nevertheless remain, despite union "representation," among the most highly exploited and impoverished sections of the working class.

"There are almost never any elections" in this model of unionization, Milkman told the *Times*. "It's all about putting pressure on decision makers at the top."

In a passage that reveals something of the financial and political strings being pulled behind such supposed "grassroots" organizing campaigns, the article refers to the non-profit Solidarity Fund, "which invited tech industry workers to apply for stipends that would help fund their organizing efforts. According to Jess Kutch, the group's executive director, Amazon employees claimed about half of the roughly $100,000 that the group has distributed, reflecting the growing activism of its employees."

According to its website, the Co-Worker Solidarity Fund was set up in a partnership with Amalgamated Bank. The bank, whose stocks are traded on NASDAQ, is the largest union-owned financial institution in the US, with a majority stake owned by an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). The bank lists the Democratic National Committee, the 2020 Biden-Harris Campaign, the 2016 Ready for Hillary Super PAC, the Teamsters, and AFSCME (American Federation of State, County, Municipal Employees) along with other unions among its clients.

Amalgamated Bank presents itself as an "activist shareholder" of a number of major corporations. As of the end of 2020, its top five holdings were in Apple ($137 million), Microsoft ($107 million), Amazon ($89 million), Facebook ($42 million), and Tesla ($34 million).

Amazonians United

Several "informal" unionization efforts, which at times present themselves as critical of the RWDSU and established unions, have gained increased attention in the corporate media recently.

On April 1 and again on April 7, a group called Amazonians United Chicagoland (AUC) staged protests at an Amazon distribution hub in the Gage Park neighborhood on Chicago's Southwest Side against the company's brutal 10 and a half-hour work shifts, known as "megacycles."

According to AUC's account of its origins in posts on the website Medium, it was first organized in 2019 at Amazon's DCH1 warehouse in McKinley Park on Chicago's South Side. Faced with lack of regular access to clean drinking water, it wrote, a group of employees at the facility circulated a petition and submitted it to management. After water was provided, the group formalized itself as DCH1Amazonians United and proceeded to conduct campaigns for paid time off for part-time workers.

After the pandemic began, the group was involved in organizing a series of "safety strikes" at the facility, calling for the warehouse to be shut for two weeks for cleaning and that management provide information on infections, among other demands. As the coronavirus spread uncontrolled and workers were forced to keep laboring without adequate protections, the job actions appear to have attracted some support, with 70 to 80 participating over the course of four strikes, according to the Intercept.

The group states that it was met with repeated retaliation from Amazon, and the company would subsequently announce its plans to close the DCH1 facility earlier this year, after which DCH1 Amazonians United renamed itself to Amazonians United Chicagoland. Last month, Amazon reached a settlement with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) resolving complaints by members of the group that it had retaliated against them.

The group has pointed to legitimate and significant issues faced by broad sections of Amazon workers—dangerous and degrading working conditions, lack of benefits, management abuse. However, a serious approach to workers' struggles, i.e., one based on Marxism and scientific class analysis, requires a careful examination of the political associations, outlook and background of the organization's leading figures, in order to determine its actual relationship to the interests of the working class.

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The group has received support—both verbal and financial—from the Democratic Party, particularly the DSA and Sanders wings. Chicago Democratic Alderman Byron Sigcho-Lopez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), "has been a fixture at protests outside DCH1," according to the pro-union publication *Labor Notes*, and is regularly featured in the group's social media accounts.

According to *Fortune*, Sanders, a prominent backer of the RWDSU drive, has "helped raise money [for Amazonians United]—his office said somewhere in the six-figure realm—for the group's mutual aid fund."

A March interview in *Rampant Magazine*, conducted by two former members of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization, spells out the tactical approach of the AUC to establishing a union among Amazon workers in Chicago.

Christian Zamarrón (also known as Don Zama), a leader of AUC and its most frequently interviewed spokesman, solidarized himself with the union drive in Alabama but criticized the top-down campaign by the RWDSU: "My coworkers in Alabama, as far as I can tell, don't have a strong organizing committee that is taking on fights within the workplace. RWDSU organizers could be guiding them in how to organize themselves, but they're not. So, I don't blame the workers, I blame the union staffers for misguiding workers."

Zamarrón continued, "We're building a real union, not some useless business union that's simply a dues-extracting organization of lawyer-like staff for workers to call. We're not interested in handing our collective power over to some bureaucrat who shows up every three years to 'negotiate' a concessionary contract through backroom deals with our bosses. We don't need the recognition of the NLRB or Amazon to form our union, grow our union, or fight as a union. Our union is us workers, organized, acting collectively, building unity, growing in solidarity, fighting as one."

Workers certainly need organizations that are free from the bureaucratic control of the AFL-CIO executives. That is why the *World Socialist Web Site*, *International Amazon Workers Voice* and the Socialist Equality Party urge Amazon workers to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the corporatist unions, to fight for the demands which meet their needs, such as substantial wage increases and genuine workplace safety measures. Such an initiative can only be successful to the extent that it is based on a political struggle by the working class against both the Democratic and Republican parties and the development of a powerful political movement of the working class internationally against capitalism and for socialism.

That is not what Zamarrón is proposing. This is made clear by Zamarrón's own political history and his connections to the Democratic Party and what he calls the "useless, dues extracting" AFL-CIO.

Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations

Zamarrón is presented in various interviews as a rank-and-file "warehouse worker in Chicago" (*Atlantic*) and one of the "lockdown heroes" (*Financial Times*). A closer examination of Zamarrón's background, however, reveals extensive training by the AFL-CIO apparatus and the Democratic Party.

According to a resumé for Zamarrón on alumnius.net, he worked as a field organizer for Democrat Jesus "Chuy" Garcia's run for Mayor of Chicago in 2015. Garcia, now a US Representative in Illinois' 4th Congressional District, helped push through $400 million in cuts and thousands of layoffs in his time as commissioner of Cook County, where Chicago is located. He waged a failed challenge for the mayorship against Rahm Emanuel, in a campaign backed by the pseudo-left leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union.

Zamarrón also worked for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 521 in San Jose, California and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).

Most significant and revealing, however, is Zamarrón's education. Zamarrón graduated from Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) in 2011. Zamarón's photo is featured prominently in a brochure for Cornell's ILR, which quotes him as saying: "What you're learning is how to lead an organization, how to organize people, how to work in a group, how to bargain collectively, how to think critically, and how to form and support a convincing argument."

In fact, the ILR was set up by New York's Democratic-run state legislature in 1945 to provide "a common training program" for representatives of labor and management based on a "mutual and cooperative analysis of the problems common to both groups," the New York State Joint Legislative Committee on Industrial and Labor Conditions said at the time. Over the decades, the ILR has produced a "who's who" of bureaucrats and executives for the AFL-CIO, corporate America and the US Labor Department.

ILR alumni include American Federation of Teachers President and Democratic National Committee member Randi Weingarten (Class of 1980), UNITE HERE President Bruce S. Raynor (Class of 1972), and Seth Harris (Class of 1983), former President Obama's acting US secretary of labor and current top labor adviser to President Biden.

Alumni also include a long list of former chief human resource officers from some of corporate America's top companies, including IBM, JP Morgan Chase, Coca-Cola, Archer Daniels Midland, Northrop Grumman and General Dynamics NASSCO.

Among those on the teaching staff of the ILR are Andy Stern, the former president of the SEIU. Stern was notorious for expanding the union's membership by signing sweetheart contracts with nursing home companies that brought the SEIU in without workers even knowing it.

Also on its teaching staff is Lee Adler, a former attorney for the United Mine Workers of America. In 1989-90, he played a despicable role in the UMWA's betrayal of the Pittston strike and abandonment of militant miners who were railroaded to prison or even murdered on the picket line, like John McCoy, on January 16, 1990. Adler was the lead defense attorney in the case of the Milburn Nine—a group of striking West Virginia miners who were framed up by the government on bombing and conspiracy charges—and pressured seven of them into entering guilty pleas. The bogus character of the case was exposed when one Milburn miner who refused to plead guilty was acquitted when his case went to trial.

Significantly, during the height of the Cold War, Cornell's ILR School had a treacherous record of collaborating with the CIA, known as "Murder, Inc.," for its role in carrying out assassinations, torture and regime change operations for US imperialism. According to the 1967 article "Central Intelligence Agency and the Universities," published in the academic journal *Minerva*, "On 26 February, it was reported that the Marshall Foundation of Houston, Texas, which had received funds alleged to have passed through other foundations from the CIA, had contributed $289,500 to the School of Industrial and Labor Relations of Cornell University during the years 1961 to 1963. … The grant was used to provide university training for trade union officials interested in international affairs."

Continuing, the article stated, "Cornell University published on 11 March a list of eight organisations that 'have contributed funds to Cornell during the past 10 years [and] appear on the list of organisations reported in the press to have had CIA support'. The largest grant was for $436,000, made between 1960 and 1963 to the New York State School of Industrial Relations."

More recent sources of funding for the ILR are difficult to track.

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According to the website Influence Watch, the ILR does not reveal its donors and does not publish an annual financial report. Nor does the Cornell University annual financial report show sources of funding for the ILR.

However, a Cornell University cross-department task force published a report in July 2017 examining "extension and outreach" efforts among Cornell's contract colleges, including the ILR. The report provides a general breakdown of revenue sources directed toward "public service/extension outreach." For these activities, ILR had revenue of $31,822,526 in fiscal year 2016, with "government grants and contracts" accounting for 46.36 percent of that total, or roughly $14.7 million, up from a share of 38.59 percent in FY2015. The report notes: "Fee for service (included in Educational Activities and other) and grants/contracts are critical components of revenues. In the case of ILR, these sources account for approximately 85%-95% of revenue."

The AFL-CIO's "Solidarity Center" and US imperialism

Among the "extension and outreach" activities carried out by the ILR are internships at the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, also known as the American Center for International Labor Solidarity. The Solidarity Center receives more than 96 percent of its funding from the US State Department's National Endowment for Democracy and plays a critical role in carrying out US foreign policy objectives.

The Solidarity Center and its predecessor, the American Institute of Free Labor Development (AIFLD), has long been involved in the subversion of left-wing unions and workers struggles, and, significantly, in CIA-backed coups or attempted coups, from Guatemala (1954) and Chile (1973), to Honduras (2009) and Venezuela (2002, 2019).

According to his ILR student profile, Zamarrón traveled to Mexico to work for the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center in Mexico City in the spring of 2010. In his account of his time at the Center, he writes: "As a strategic researcher for the Solidarity Center, I conducted 'undercover' investigations, research, and strategic analyses of Mexican-owned operations and Multi-National Corporations. I also frequently wrote, updated, and translated reports on Mexican labor struggles that were used in the planning of union campaigns across the globe and which were also used to garner support from international unions."

The information on workers' activity compiled by Zamarrón would ultimately have been incorporated into reports submitted by the Center's Mexico office to the State Department and other sections of the foreign policy apparatus. A current job posting on the Solidarity Center's website for a Country Program Director for the Mexico office states that the director "educates and informs USAID [the United States Agency for International Development] and the [US] Embassy of organized labor's role in the development process and *how Solidarity Center programs contribute to their strategic objectives* [emphasis added]." USAID has itself been extensively linked to the CIA and US regime change efforts, including a covert operation under the Obama administration to set up a social media network aimed at destabilizing the Cuban government.

The main activity of the Solidarity Center in Mexico has consisted of promotion of the supposedly "independent unions" which hope to prevent the rebellion of Mexican workers against the corrupt Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) from taking an anti-capitalist direction and threatening the interests of US-based multinationals and American imperialism. This includes Solidarity Center's efforts to contain the wildcat strikes against the CTM that erupted in the border town of Matamoros in early 2019.

In his Solidarity Center student profile, Zamarrón gives special thanks to his Cornell professor Clete Daniel. According to colleagues who posted condolences after his death in 2010, since 1989, Professor Daniel had been placing his Cornell students as interns at the Solidarity Center's HQ and field offices throughout the world.

Zamarrón also thanks Professor Lois Spier Gray, without whose "generous support" his internship at the Solidarity Center would not have been possible, he states. According to a 2018 obituary in the *Cornell Chronicle*, during World War II Gray "was recruited into secret military intelligence work at the Pentagon," working in a unit that later became part of the CIA. Afterwards, "she pursued her interest in unions and work with the National Labor Relations Board in Buffalo in 1945. A year later, Gray was hired by ILR, which she helped shape as it grew from a school with few students to one that enrolls about 1,200 students."

To say the least, those trained by the ILR and the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center are not simply "rank-and-file Amazon workers" engaged in a little "labor organizing."

Over many decades, the AFL-CIO, working under the direction of the State Department and other arms of the capitalist state, has "perfected" the art of cultivating operatives in countries around the world, individuals who are tasked with pacifying labor unrest and directing it into safe channels. As the right-wing, anti-worker, corporatist character of the unions has become ever more explicit, so have the unions become more and more vehemently defended by pseudo-left political parties and tendencies. Groups such as the DSA include in themselves not a few upper-middle class individuals who have found high-ranking and lavishly paid positions in the union apparatus, perhaps most prominently Jesse Sharkey, president of the Chicago Teachers Union.

To a greater or lesser degree, this process has taken place both in the US and in other countries. On its website, AUC states that it has sister organizations in Sacramento, California and New York City and is affiliated with the "Amazon Workers International" (AWI), which claims supporters in Germany, Poland and other European countries.

Those presented as the co-founders of the AWI in media reports themselves have backgrounds in the European trade unions and pseudo-left milieu. One, Christian Krähling, was an official in the Ver.di trade union at an Amazon facility in Bad Hersfeld in Germany, until he died late last year. Krähling was closely associated with the misnamed, and Left Party-affiliated, Rosa Luxemburg Institute, according to an obituary on the Institute's site. In 2018, he ran in the Hesse state elections for the Left Party—an organization formed by ex-Stalinists and disaffected Social Democrats that has pushed through painful social cuts where it has been in power.

For independent rank-and-file committees, not union fronts

Amazonians United and its affiliates are not an expression of a movement from below by Amazon workers, or an organization which is capable of putting an end to workers' exploitation by the company. Instead, it is a part of the American ruling class' increasingly desperate maneuvers to head off major struggles and subordinate the working class to the domestic and foreign policy needs of US imperialism. In this, the bourgeoisie and their political representatives are relying upon the support of the pseudo-left, whose upper-middle class members seek to subject workers to the discipline of the unions, while seeking highly paid and privileged positions for themselves in its apparatus.

Amazon workers want to fight. But they need new organizations, genuinely controlled by the rank-and-file, led by the most militant, trusted and class-conscious workers, completely independent of the corporate-controlled trade unions, and guided by an international perspective and

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strategy.

That is why the *International Amazon Workers Voice* and the Socialist Equality Party call on Amazon workers to join the growing network of rank-and-file committees, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), in order to prepare and carry out a counteroffensive against the ruling class and the entire capitalist system.

For help forming a committee at your workplace, contact the *International Amazon Workers Voice* today.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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