Behind the Biden administration's insistence on bringing the unions into Amazon

International Amazon Workers Voice
18 August 2021

Earlier this month, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that Amazon officials unjustly interfered in a unionization effort in Bessemer, Alabama earlier this year and recommended that the election be re-run.

According to the NLRB, Amazon's dissemination of anti-union propaganda throughout the facility and installing a mailbox on its property, under the view of security cameras, to collect ballots "destroyed the laboratory conditions [for the vote] and justifies a second election." The NLRB's official ruling is due to be announced later this month, when it is expected to formally side with the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU).

The ruling was hailed by pseudo-left outfits, such as the Democratic Socialists of America, *Labor Notes* and *Jacobin* magazine, who claim that Amazon's "union-busting" campaign contributed to the RWDSU's defeat. In fact, the union was defeated because workers did not see any advantage in bringing it in, under conditions where the union itself pointedly refused to connect the campaign to any demands relating to working conditions, wages or COVID-19 safety measures. Only 13 percent of workers eligible to vote cast ballots in favor.

What is notable about the Amazon campaign, in comparison to the mass struggles which built the unions a century ago, is the degree to which it has relied almost exclusively upon the direct support from the capitalist state. The NLRB's intervention is the second time that the US federal government, under Democratic President Joseph Biden, has intervened on behalf of the unionization effort. Earlier this year, Biden recorded a video featuring an unprecedented endorsement of the RWDSU campaign in Bessemer. The fact that Biden staked both his own reputation and the prestige of his office on this campaign was a clear indication that he saw in it a pressing strategic interest for American capitalism.

What accounts for the Biden administration's continued insistence on installing a union at Amazon?

The American capitalist class faces an unprecedented economic, social and political crisis. Nearly six months after Biden declared that by summer time the US population would be able to "mark our independence" from COVID-19, the country is once again facing an upsurge of the pandemic.

In addition, the federal unemployment benefits and the eviction moratorium are being ended. In many circumstances, benefits for those small businesses and individuals in dire need simply never arrived. Millions of people face the prospect of a winter of deep suffering alongside the constant threat of the coronavirus.

Meanwhile, billionaires, including Amazon's own founder and former-CEO Jeffrey Bezos, have seen their wealth and financial holdings expand by trillions since 2020. According to *Forbes*, the world's billionaires increased their wealth from $8 trillion in 2019 to $13 trillion now.

While Biden was elected because he presented himself as a more rational alternative to the Republican Party's Donald Trump, he has continued all the basic policies of his predecessor. This includes the rapid reopening of schools across the country while lying about the threats of COVID-19. The rapid growth of the pandemic, particularly among children, will inevitably produce fresh eruptions of social anger among workers, parents and teachers across the country.

Now with the debacle in Afghanistan, American imperialism faces a crisis of legitimacy both at home and abroad. At the same time, the humiliating collapse of the two-decade war in Afghanistan will only accelerate preparations for new and deadlier conflicts, including with nuclear-armed China.

Under these conditions, American capitalism needs some means of trying to contain the upsurge of class struggle and enforce social stability and "labor peace" at home while it prepares for new wars. Above all, the ruling class needs a means of containing the growth of socialist politics within the working class.

Capitalism has such means with the unions, which have pitched themselves to the state and the corporations for decades as a critical means of suppressing the class struggle. This was put most bluntly in 2018 by a lawyer for the AFSCME public employees union in the Supreme Court case *Janus v. AFSCME*, when he told the justices, "Union security is the tradeoff for no strikes." Without safeguarding the institutional interests of the unions, he warned, "you can raise an untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country."

In a certain sense, Biden is following the playbook established by Franklin Roosevelt during World War II, the last

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major crisis of world capitalism, when he worked with the unions to enforce an unpopular "no strike pledge" for the duration of the war, in exchange for state-sanctioned measures such as the automatic dues check-off, which began to insulate the union bureaucracy from popular pressure from below.

This was anticipated by the exiled leader of the Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky, who wrote in 1938, "In periods of acute class struggle, the leading bodies of the trade unions aim to become masters of the mass movement in order to render it harmless. This is already occurring during the period of simple strikes, especially in the case of the mass sit-down strikes which shake the principle of bourgeois property. In time of war or revolution, when the bourgeoisie is plunged into exceptional difficulties, trade union leaders usually become bourgeois ministers."

World War II, however, ended 76 years ago. Roosevelt's use of the unions to try to ensure labor peace took place at a time when the unions were being built as part of a mass upsurge of class struggle. The opposite is the case now: The growth of the class struggle today inevitably reveals the rot and decay of the official unions, including their complete hostility to the workers they long since ceased to represent. Therefore, they are compelled to rely even more directly on support from the capitalist state.

Having long presided over plant closures and layoffs while lining their own pockets with bribes, corporate stocks and other sources of wealth, the union executives are now actively collaborating in the reopening of schools and workplaces and are even collaborating with management to cover up infections and deaths. In 2020, despite the immense social conflict unleashed by the pandemic, the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics officially recognized only eight major work stoppages, the third lowest level since 1947.

However, a major feature of the past year has been the growth of wildcat strikes and other spontaneous forms of opposition within the working class, including opposition to the treachery of the unions. According to the Institute for New Economic Thinking, since March 2020, when the pandemic first was declared, there have been over 1,400 work stoppages in the US. The report notes, "[w]hile the pace of strikes is slightly slower than when the pandemic began … It seems, once more, workers have had enough."

The article continues, "No longer are union leaders calling for strike votes with strict control of strike activity." It says, "Now workers, often in nonunion workplaces, are coordinating online and simply walking out …"

While the White House backs the RWDSU's claim of interference, no doubt there are also behind-the-scenes discussions between Biden and Amazon Chairman Jeff Bezos, in which the former is attempting to explain to the latter that the alternative is not between a union and no union, but between a struggle of Amazon workers which is controlled at the outset by the trade union apparatus, or the development of rank-and-file committees that function as genuine organizations of working-class struggle.

The Biden administration's second intervention on behalf of the RWDSU comes less than a month after the betrayal by the UAW of 2,900 striking Volvo Trucks workers in the New River Valley (NRV) region of Virginia. The struggle pitted the Volvo workers, eager to fight for improvements in their wages and benefits after being forced to take considerable cuts over the last decade, against both the company and the treachery of their own union.

Rather than accepting the corporate-union gang-up, striking workers formed the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) with the help of the Socialist Equality Party to provide workers a rallying point of opposition to the UAW-Volvo conspiracy. While the strike was ended by Volvo and the UAW, who resorted to strike busting by forcing workers to accept a contract they had previously rejected, the strike and the rank-and-file committee drew strength from workers internationally. Workers voted down a trio of rotten offers placed in front of them by company and the union.

Significantly, shortly after the strike, Biden paid a visit to the Mack Trucks facility in Pennsylvania. Mack Trucks is owned by Volvo, and the plant handles parts from NRV. In his speech from the plant, the "pro-union" Biden did not even mention the strike or the authoritarian maneuver to shut it down. This is a clear indication that the Biden administration is seeking to elevate the union apparatus to prevent any struggles from breaking from its grip.

Biden and the unions, meanwhile, are devoting fresh resources to the unionization drive at Amazon. The Teamsters union, which presides over working conditions at UPS that are in some respects even worse than at Amazon—warehouse workers at the delivery giant begin at a mere $13 per hour—has announced that it will commit all of its resources to "organize" at Amazon.

Should the RWDSU or the Teamsters enter Amazon workplaces, workers will find themselves in the same "two-front war" as the striking Volvo workers. To defend their interests, they will be compelled to form their own rank-and-file committee, independent of the unions, as their Amazon coworkers in Baltimore, Maryland have done.

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