

What's behind the Teamsters' unionization campaign at Amazon

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At its convention in late June, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters resolved to conduct a nationwide unionization campaign to establish its presence at Amazon. The union has committed to fully funding this initiative, which will include the creation of an Amazon Division within the Teamsters.

The Teamsters' campaign has nothing to do with "building worker power at Amazon," as the resolution states. Rather, it is an escalation of the drive by President Joseph Biden's administration to bring workers under a form of state guardianship through the use of the pro-capitalist trade unions. Under conditions of the debacle in Afghanistan, the growth of opposition among industrial workers and growing surge in the coronavirus pandemic, made possible by profit-driven policies under both parties, the American capitalist ruling class is extremely sensitive to the threat of a challenge to its rule from below.

The previous attempt by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) to unionize a single Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama ended in high-profile debacle for the union and the Democratic Party. In spite of a full-court press by the media and the Democratic Party, including high-profile endorsements by Bernie Sanders and Biden himself, who staked the prestige of his office on an unprecedented de-facto endorsement of the union, scarcely one in eight eligible workers voted to bring the RWDSU into the facility.

This had far less to do with the campaign against the union by Amazon management, which, by both historical standards and those of the company's own practices, was relatively light, than with the fact that the union refused to connect the campaign with any concrete demands or even establish significant lines of contact among workers inside the facility. The National Labor Relations Board, meanwhile, is intervening to force a re-vote at Bessemer, another indication of the support for the campaign by the federal government.

To maintain and protect its own position, the ruling class must find a way to suppress and divert mounting social

opposition among workers before it finds an independent, revolutionary outlet. For many decades, the unions have consciously served this function, suppressing strikes to historic lows, and paving the way for massive increases in social inequality. Even in "union" shops such as the auto parts supplier Dana, conditions prevail which are worse in some respects than in the 19th century before the unions were founded. Under the terms of the current contract, Dana workers are forced to work seven days a week for as many as 12 hours a day for weeks at a time.

The rejection of the RWDSU shows the degree to which decades of union-backed wage cuts, layoffs and brutal working conditions have created an unbridgeable social gulf between workers and the privileged union bureaucracy, which is unable and unwilling to make the slightest appeal to popular anger over conditions for which they themselves bear a responsibility. Meanwhile, the depth of hostility among workers to these pro-corporate outfits found a fresh verification this weekend in a massive rebellion against a contract backed by the United Auto Workers and United Steelworkers at Dana during balloting which began on Saturday and continues into this week.

The considerable resources of the Teamsters union, whose assets total more than \$500 million according to the latest financial filings, are being brought forward in an attempt to plug the breach. But the corrupt, gangster-ridden Teamsters apparatus confronts, if anything, even worse problems with its "credibility" than the RWDSU. At workplaces across the country, the Teamsters have enforced multi-tier wage structures, inadequate health benefits and mandatory overtime. Moreover, the Teamsters regularly runs roughshod over the democratic rights of workers and is infamous for its historical use of violence to suppress opposition from the rank-and-file. In 2018, the Teamsters used an anti-democratic clause in its constitution to ratify a contract at UPS which a majority of voters had rejected.

The resolution adopted at the convention states that members of the Teamsters have the "best wages and working conditions in the [logistics] industry." In point of

fact, this is false: the Teamsters oversees conditions at UPS warehouses which are in some respects worse than at Amazon. Under the present contract, the starting hourly wage for part-time UPS warehouse workers is a mere \$13. In contrast, warehouse employees at Amazon, who do not belong to any union, earn a starting wage of \$15. Before this, wages were even worse, only \$10 per hour. The current UPS contract also created a new category of lower-paid part-time drivers, which represents a significant attack on one of the few decent-paying positions left at the company.

Any appeal which the Teamsters union makes will not be to rank-and-file workers, but to Jeff Bezos and Amazon senior management. It will argue that it can help Amazon keep wages down and workers in line, just as it has done at UPS.

The intervention by the Teamsters underscores the fact that the Biden administration sees the unionization of Amazon as a strategic question. For decades, the American state has routinely intervened into the Teamsters union in order to safeguard what it saw as its key interests. This includes 1941, when Teamsters President Daniel Tobin cooperated with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to purge and imprison the Trotskyist leadership of the Teamsters local in Minneapolis, which was opposed to US imperialism's preparations for entry into World War II. President Reagan had close relations with Teamster presidents Frank Fitzsimmons, a known racketeer, and Jackie Presser, who worked with organized crime and as an informant for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

To salvage the Teamsters' credibility, under conditions where it had been seriously undermined by its well-known connections to the Mafia, the federal government used the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act in the late 1980s to orchestrate a federal takeover of the Teamsters and oust hundreds of union bureaucrats. State intervention, however, did not "clean up" the union, but pushed to the fore newer, less openly tainted layers of bureaucrats who proved their ability to sell out the interests of workers just as well as their predecessors.

Ron Carey, for example, was elected president of the union in 1991, in the first general election for the national leadership in the union's history. His chief "accomplishment" was the sellout of the national strike at UPS in 1997, which sanctioned mass layoffs and the expanded use of two-tier wages. Carey was later expelled from the union after being indicted for embezzling union funds for his own re-election campaign.

The critical role in providing a "left" cover for state intervention was played by the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, a pseudo-reform caucus which entered into Carey's administration. While they have been at times the target of

bitter and even violent factional attacks by the dominant faction led by James Hoffa Jr., the TDU has sought for decades to promote illusions in the union's capacity for self-reform, claiming its pro-corporate policies can be changed by a combination of ordinary elections and pressure from the government.

This unprincipled organization is endorsing a leadership slate, Teamsters United, in this October's Teamster elections led by Sean O'Brien, who was until recently a vicious ally of Hoffa who threatened violence against TDU candidates, and Fred Zuckerman, the president of the local covering the UPS Worldport facility in Louisville, Kentucky.

One of the other items of business at the convention was to ratify candidates for the elections. This undemocratic procedure is used to toss out candidates who do not receive sufficient support from delegates of the convention, made up of union bureaucrats. While TDU-backed slates normally barely squeaked past the required 5 percent threshold in previous conventions, the O'Brien-Zuckerman Teamsters United slate garnered more than half of the vote at the convention, raising the real prospect that a TDU-backed slate may win the leadership of the union.

The support for Teamsters United indicates, first of all, considerable factional support for the slate within the bureaucracy itself. But it also likely demonstrates the awareness among the Teamsters of the degree of hostility among the rank-and-file and the need for it to make certain adjustments to avoid losing control of the situation. The convention also ratified several TDU-backed amendments to the constitution, including the elimination of the reactionary clause which was used to override the 2018 vote at UPS. However, they defeated a proposal which would have limited salaries for top Teamsters officials to roughly \$330,000 per year.

Amazon workers will not be able to take a single step forward through the mechanism of the Teamsters. Instead, the way forward is by mobilizing their own independent strength outside of the control of the union bureaucracy through rank-and-file committees, as Amazon workers in Baltimore, together with Dana auto parts workers, teachers and other sections of the working class have already done.



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