

The class issues in the Amazon unionization drive in New York City

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A unionization effort has been underway since April at four Amazon facilities in New York City's Staten Island. The organization behind the campaign, Amazon Labor Union (ALU), is seeking to unionize the 7,000 Amazon workers employed at the warehouses, which includes the main 855,000 square-foot Amazon fulfillment center servicing New York City, known as JFK8.

The ALU announced Monday it had collected the necessary 2,100 names (or 30 percent of the workforce) on union cards and had submitted a petition for a recognition vote with the National Labor Relations Board office in Brooklyn, New York. The ALU would need more than 50 percent of the votes in an election to be recognized as the official bargaining agent.

No doubt workers are looking for a way to fight. Amazon is infamous for its hyper-exploitation of workers, imposing brutal and unsafe working conditions in their warehouses around the world. These conditions—long shifts on your feet under strict surveillance, grueling “productivity” quotas, heavy lifting, limited bathroom breaks, etc.—were only exacerbated throughout the pandemic, where workers have been packed into warehouses with minimum mitigation efforts, causing nearly 20,000 Amazon employees to get infected with COVID-19 during the first six months of the pandemic last year.

If the ALU were an organization that could unite Amazon workers and mobilize their collective strength against this corporate giant, the International Amazon Workers Voice (IAWV) would not hesitate to support it. But an examination of the forces behind the ALU makes it clear it has close connections to and is oriented toward the AFL-CIO unions and the Democratic Party, which are not friends, but enemies of Amazon workers.

The RWDSU debacle in Alabama

The leader of the ALU is former Amazon employee Chris Smalls, a former assistant manager at JFK8, who was fired in March 2020, for leading a walkout to protest the unsafe working conditions during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ALU was launched immediately following the overwhelming defeat of the unionization drive by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) at the BHM1 Amazon fulfillment center in Bessemer, Alabama. Although the RWDSU campaign had the backing of the Biden administration, leading Democrats and even some Republicans, the union managed to win the votes of only 13 percent of the Bessemer workforce.

Smalls supported the RWDSU campaign and traveled to Alabama to support it. After the overwhelming rejection by Bessemer workers, however, he joined several other “labor activists” who criticized the RWDSU’s “top-down” approach. Instead of relying on celebrity

endorsements and ad campaigns, they said, the RWDSU should have done more to engage Bessemer workers and give them a reason to back the union.

None of these after-the-fact critics pointed to the real cause of the RWDSU’s defeat. After four decades of collusion with the corporations and government in the destruction of workers’ jobs and living standards, millions of workers are completely alienated from these pro-company organizations and see no reason to give them any money from their hard-earned paychecks.

In June, RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum publicly backed Smalls’ effort to unionize the Staten Island facilities, telling the *Guardian*, “I hope that Chris and others around the country will be successful. We look forward to supporting them. If Chris runs out of money, we’d support them and not look for anything in return.”

Smalls attempted to distance the ALU from the RWDSU, telling *Jacobin*, “I didn’t have a great experience with the union down there, so I was kind of surprised by Appelbaum’s quote in that article. It’s good to know that they support us, but I think that we’re going to stay the completely independent route.”

The ALU would have a better chance if it was “independent” and “worker-led,” he told *Business Insider*. “That will build more confidence for workers that want to join because they’ll be like, ‘Hey look, this is something that is employee-driven, this is not a third party coming in, this is you guys creating your own union with your own set of rules and negotiations. I think that’s more appealing to the worker.’”

In promoting the ALU as an “independent union,” its backers are acknowledging that the established trade unions are too discredited to win significant support from Amazon workers. However, the ALU is anything but independent.

The ALU’s own website completely contradicts its claim of independence. “We are supported by countless labor organizations, politicians, news media, and established unions, both in NYC and across the country. They all are offering their resources and expertise to make our dream a reality.”

During its months-long campaign in Bessemer, the RWDSU never raised a single demand to Amazon, because it did not want to forfeit the support of the Democratic Party and Republicans like Florida Senator Marco Rubio.

For its part, the ALU has a brief list of demands on its web site, including, “higher, more competitive wages,” a return of stock awards and other bonuses, “a reasonable increase to the amount of distributed Paid Time Off (PTO) and Vacation Time, as well as an end to the Unpaid Time Off (UPT) system.” In addition, the ALU wants “policy improvements,” including, “longer breaks, more reasonable rates, Covid protections, less mandatory overtime, building closures due to hazardous weather, better promotion policies and guaranteed holiday time off.”

Amazon workers no doubt support many of these demands. But the ALU does not explain how it plans to achieve them. Instead, it says it will

have the “power to enter contract negotiations with the company,” and suggests that the mere establishment of the union will lead to higher wages, protection from arbitrary firings and more. “With a union, everything is on the table,” the ALU states.

The real record of the unions

Such claims fly in the face of reality. Over the last four decades, when unions have been “at the table,” they have not negotiated for more, but imposed management’s dictates that workers accept less.

The unions long ago abandoned any of the functions they were traditionally associated with. They do not fight over workers’ grievances, they’ve abandoned the eight-hour day, they’ve overseen and have been instrumental in the stagnation and decline of wages, and they’ve kept workers on the job during the pandemic.

As the recent WSWs article, “ Jacobin boosts Teamsters bureaucracy’s campaign to ‘organize’ Amazon workers ,” noted, full-time UPS drivers start at only \$21 an hour, just \$1 more than Amazon drivers make. Inside part-time workers start at wages of \$15.50 an hour or two-and-a-half dollars *less* than an Amazon worker’s \$18 wage. To add insult to injury, UPS workers have union dues deducted from their paychecks by the Teamsters, which imposed these terms in the 2018 contract by overriding the “no” vote of the majority of UPS workers.

It is noteworthy that Smalls praised the decision of the Teamsters bureaucracy to launch a unionizing drive at Amazon. “We encourage them to try their efforts,” he said on the podcast *The Checkout*. Smalls added that he hoped “other unions that have been here that are established will also support us and join us in our efforts.”

The backers of the ALU are not the first to announce that they were building a “strong, effective and democratic union.” The Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and other “union reform” movements have spent decades making these claims, only to be integrated into the corrupt labor bureaucracy. Like the ALU they claimed workers could defend their interests through militancy, while subordinating the working class to the pro-capitalist and nationalist framework of the unions and their political subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party.

After decades in which the unions suppressed the class struggle, the conflict between rank-and-file workers and the corporatist unions has reached a boiling point. Since the beginning of the year, Alabama coal miners and workers at Volvo Trucks, Frito-Lay, Deere and Dana have cast near unanimous “no” votes against union-backed contracts. This movement has now erupted into what is developing to be the largest strike wave by US workers in generations.

The way forward for Amazon workers

A genuine struggle by Amazon workers to improve their wages and conditions will immediately throw them into battle against the entire trade union apparatus, along with the corporate-controlled Democrats and Republicans, which have overseen a decades-long transfer of wealth from the working class to billionaires like Jeff Bezos. The ALU’s dependence on the unions and the Democratic Party precludes it from conducting any serious struggle that threatened these relations.

There is nothing the American ruling class fears more than the emergence of a movement of the working class that is not controlled by the trade union apparatus. This is particularly true for the half million

Amazon workers in the US who have the power to impose a chokehold on a global supply chain already facing a crisis due to the pandemic, labor shortages and threats of strikes by logistics workers. The Biden administration is promoting the corporatist trade unions in a last-ditch effort to contain and strangle this emerging movement of the working class.

An independent workers’ movement means, above all, a complete break from the Democrats and the trade unions. The material and political interests of politicians in both capitalist parties of big business and of war, along with the interests of their well-paid crony counterparts in the trade union bureaucracy, stand diametrically opposed to the interests of the vast working class.

The ALU calls for no such break from these bitter enemies of workers. Creating “new” trade unions with the same pro-capitalist and nationalist orientation and in collaboration with the established ones will not offer workers any solutions.

The rising opposition of workers is undoubtedly in the direction of independence, yet new traps, such as the ALU and the Democratic Socialists of America-aligned Amazonians United, are being laid to try and fool workers with more “worker driven organizing” campaigns, capture growing opposition within the unions and cover over basic political issues.

Whatever the outcome of a future vote, the International Amazon Workers Voice (IAWV) urges workers at JFK8 and other facilities to build rank-and-file committees, which are genuinely independent of the pro-corporate unions and both big business parties.

As the IAWV wrote on the eve of the Bessemer vote, “a new orientation is needed. Where the unions promote corporatism and class collaboration, workers need an anti-capitalist perspective. Where the unions promote national chauvinism, working class internationalism is needed. Where the union proceeds from what management is willing to part with, workers must proceed from what they urgently require.”

Rank-and-file committees must link up across workplaces, industries, and countries and fight to unify and mobilize the international working class in a counteroffensive against the capitalist system, which sacrifices every aspect of life, including life itself, for private profit.

Such a network is being built in the form of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party, along with the *International Amazon Workers Voice* newsletter are assisting workers in the building of these interconnected network of committees of Amazon and logistics workers—such as the Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee—as well as autoworkers, educators and workers in other key industries. We urge all Amazon workers who agree with this perspective to take up this fight and contact us today!



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