

Amazon Canada workers need organizations of struggle, not pro-corporate Teamsters

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The Teamsters trade union has launched a massive top-down campaign to unionize Amazon facilities across North America. This initiative is furthest advanced in Canada, where the union has targeted nine of the 46 facilities Amazon operates countrywide.

The Teamster bureaucracy's initial efforts have focused on the "YEG1" fulfillment centre, which is located in Nisku, just south of Edmonton, Alberta, where some 600 to 800 workers toil. On September 13, the Teamsters filed for a union representation vote, based on its claim that 40 per cent or more of the workers at the YEG1 center have signed union authorization cards. If the Alberta Labour Relations Board deems this claim accurate and approves the application, a secret ballot vote will be held at the facility to determine whether to certify the Teamsters as the workers' collective bargaining agent. Last week, the Teamsters filed for a vote at a second Amazon facility, located in Calgary.

There is no doubt that Amazon workers across Canada and around the world are brutally exploited—receiving poverty wages for gruelling shifts in which they are often pushed to the breaking point—and that their working conditions can and will only be improved through workers' collective struggle.

Amazon is a global giant, with a \$1.7 trillion market cap. Its founder Jeff Bezos is the world's richest man, controlling an obscene \$211 billion. He sits atop a corporate empire that employs some 1.3 million people globally, not including seasonal workers and contractors. Amazon operates 185 fulfillment centers in North America, Europe, and Asia.

At the facility in Nisku, workers have spoken out about being tasked with retrieving items every 9 to 12 seconds, being repeatedly injured due to the heavy demands placed on them, and having their jobs and wages threatened when the impossible work quotas aren't met. Nisku Amazon workers also say that management favouritism at the facility is rampant and discrimination against workers due to race or ethnicity widespread.

The pandemic has drastically intensified the risks Amazon workers face. Business has boomed for the mega-corporation and, consequently, major hiring sprees have increased the number of workers sharing a given workspace. Workers have complained of not having access to hand sanitizer, the failure to enforce mask mandates, and that their "productivity rates" are so closely monitored by sophisticated electronic tracking equipment that they are unable to take breaks to go to the washroom.

"Even if you try to keep your social distance ... you can't," an anonymous worker employed at an Amazon fulfillment centre in Ontario told the *Globe and Mail* in January 2021. "If I have to go in this aisle and there's already three people—if I wait for these three people, it's going to be about 10 minutes. At the end of the day, I'm going to get the written warning [for working too slowly]."

Public health authorities had to step in and force Amazon to close its Brampton, Ontario, Heritage Road facility for a week last March after at least 600 workers were infected by COVID-19.

The Teamsters "organizing drive," Project Amazon, has nothing to do

with systematically mobilizing Amazon workers in struggle to put an end to these terrible conditions. Instead, the Teamsters is undertaking a coordinated push to bring Amazon's rapidly growing, low-paid workforce under its control so that it can codify the company's ruthless exploitation in collective bargaining agreements that provide it with a steady stream of dues money and prevent workers from waging an independent struggle against the global behemoth.

The Teamsters and trade unions in North America, as around the world, long ago repudiated any association with militant action and mass working class struggle, like those that led to the formation of the industrial unions across North America in the 1930s and 1940s. Under the pressure of the globalization of production, the nationally based pro-capitalist unions have been transformed over the past four decades into corporatist appendages of big business and the capitalist state that smother worker opposition and ensure companies remain "globally competitive" by enforcing job, wage and benefit cuts and speed-up.

The Teamster Amazon unionization drive was launched with the passage of a resolution at its convention in June. This came in response to the crushing defeat suffered by the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) at Amazon's Bessemer, Alabama location, where the union managed to garner the support of just 13 percent of the facility's workforce in a government-supervised vote. This pathetic result came after a sustained campaign in support of the RWDSU from a large cross-section of the political establishment, including US President Joe Biden, Trump-enthusiast and Republican Senator Marco Rubio, the *Wall Street Journal* and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. This support was motivated by their understanding that the unions act as a police force in the workplace, suppressing job action and imposing the dictates of corporate management. The dearth of support for the RWDSU among the Bessemer workers reflects the vast social gulf that exists between the corporatist unions and working people, who increasingly correctly view them as junior partners of corporate management and the state.

Like the RWDSU before it, the Teamsters is not mobilizing Amazon workers in the fight for any concrete demands. It is not calling for an immediate 40 percent wage increase, or for that matter specifying any wage demand. Nor is it calling for workers' control over the pace of work, and the enforcement of the eight-hour day. On the contrary, the "Project Amazon" campaign is based merely on the bald assertion—disproven by decades of bitter experience by workers throughout all economic sectors—that union representation will lead to improved working conditions.

The Teamsters have made no secret that Canada is a key first target in their unionization drive because its labour laws are generally more "union-friendly" than those in the United States. With Amazon preparing to hire an additional 15,000 workers across Canada this fall alone, the Teamster bureaucrats are no doubt licking their chops at the prospect of exploiting workers' justified anger and outrage with Amazon to secure a lucrative new source of dues money. They also hope that certification as the

bargaining agent at one or more Canadian Amazon facilities will enable them to demonstrate to Bezos and management that the Teamsters can be relied upon as a loyal partner, thereby reducing their resistance to its unionization campaign south of the border.

More fundamentally, the union bureaucracy instinctively senses that the deepening social and economic crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, threatens to trigger a social explosion that could call into question the capitalist profit system, thereby threatening their own fat salaries and other privileges.

Workers around the world are seeking to assert their class interests ever more boldly in opposition to decades of austerity, concessions and ever-deepening social inequality. This is expressed in a growing rebellion against the stifling grip of the unions. Rank-and-file committees have been established to wage struggles against miserable conditions at multinational giants like Volvo, John Deere, and Dana, while workers across North America have repeatedly rejected union-backed sellout contracts, often by overwhelming margins. As a massive global workforce, Amazon workers could play a pivotal role in this emerging working class upsurge, something which the Teamsters is determined to prevent.

This is why attempts to unionize Amazon are viewed so favourably within the ruling class. The unions are seen as a key prop of bourgeois rule. In the recently concluded federal election, even hard-right Conservative leader Erin O'Toole proclaimed himself a supporter of increased private sector unionization, worker (i.e., union) representation on corporate boards, and enhanced union-government-business cooperation.

In Canada, this corporatist alliance is already deeply entrenched. During the pandemic, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), of which the Teamsters is a leading member, has taken its close cooperation with the federal Liberal government and corporate Canada to a qualitatively new level. As the virus spread around the world, CLC President Hassan Yussuff appealed for a “collaborative front” between the unions and employers. Yussuff and the CLC used this front to facilitate the passage of a \$650 billion bailout for the big banks and major corporations and enforce the reckless back-to-work/back-to-school campaign that is responsible for most of the more than 28,000 COVID-19 deaths officially recorded since the pandemic began.

The CLC advocates that the “collaborative front” be made permanent so that the unions can play a role in elaborating corporate Canada’s national economic policy, which they say must ensure Canada’s “competitiveness” in the global marketplace. Under conditions of deepening inter-imperialist rivalries, support for this agenda unavoidably entails the endorsement of a massive military build-up to enforce Canadian imperialism’s economic and geostrategic interests around the globe.

The evolution of the Teamsters over the past four decades provides a textbook example of how the entire union bureaucracy has developed into a mechanism for imposing the dictates of corporate management. In workplaces across the United States and Canada, the Teamsters enforce multi-tier wage structures, inadequate health benefits and mandatory overtime. Its promotion of economic nationalism makes a mockery of its boast to be an “international” union.

The union consistently violates the democratic rights of workers and is infamous for its use of violence to suppress rank-and-file worker opposition.

The WSWS has reported on the Teamsters’ role in overseeing conditions at UPS warehouses in the US that are, in some respects, worse than at Amazon. 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 adoption of the current UPS contract saw the creation of a new category of lower-paid part-time drivers. Moreover, UPS warehouse workers in the United States earn a starting wage of just \$13 per hour

compared to non-unionized US Amazon employees’ starting wage of \$15 per hour. These poverty wages stand in stark contrast to the earnings of Teamsters Canada President Francois Laporte, who takes home (as of the last publicly available financial filings) a whopping US\$293,530 per year.

Within the last few years alone, Teamsters Canada has partaken in numerous worker betrayals and sell-outs.

The Teamsters, which represents workers at Canadian Pacific Rail and CN Rail, has spent decades aiding in the deregulation of the rail industry and the slashing of jobs. This has created treacherous working conditions for rail workers and resulted in such incidents as a 2019 train derailment that killed 3 CP Rail workers.

When 3,200 CN Rail workers went on strike in November 2019, the Teamsters shut down the strike after just seven days. The union did not release any details of the proposed contract settlement to its members—let alone allow them to vote on it before calling off the strike. Laporte promptly went out of his way to praise the big business Liberal government for helping to broker the deal.

Amazon workers cannot take a single step forward in the struggle against their slave-like working conditions within the confines of the Teamsters, or any other of the pro-corporate syndicates that call themselves unions. If the Teamsters succeed in their unionization drive due to the misconception among workers that the union will improve their position, Amazon workers will rapidly confront the fact that they will have to build rank-and-file committees independently of the Teamsters bureaucracy to fight for their interests. These committees will have to unify the struggles of Amazon workers across national borders in the fight for decent-paying, secure jobs and better conditions for all. They will also need to establish the closest possible ties with other sections of the working class, from warehouse workers at other retail giants, to auto and industrial workers battling low wages and precarious, part-time work.

A genuine working class struggle to enforce better working conditions against this global corporate giant can only be successful if it unifies Amazon workers internationally. As such an offensive develops, it will inevitably come into conflict with Bezos and other oligarchs, who claim they have absolute power to dictate how and under what conditions workers are forced to labour, and the capitalist governments who serve them. It will unavoidably raise the question of which class rules society: the rich oligarchs with their multi-billion stock portfolios, or workers seeking a livable wage and decent working conditions. For this reason, the struggle at Amazon is above all a political one that can only be conducted on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges Amazon Canada workers to build a cross-Canada and international network of rank-and-file committees, independent of the corporatist trade unions and all the political representatives of big business. We urge all Amazon Canada workers to follow the example of their brothers and sisters in Baltimore, Maryland, where they have established the Amazon BWI2 Rank-and-File Safety Committee, and to subscribe to the *International Amazon Workers Voice*.



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