

NLRB gives go-ahead to unionization vote at Starbucks locations in Buffalo, New York

Trévon Austin
10 November 2021

Last week, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) issued a ruling authorizing a unionization vote at three Starbucks coffee shops in and around Buffalo, New York. The campaign at Starbucks is being organized by a local chapter of the Workers United union, an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

On Wednesday, the NLRB will begin mailing ballots to employees, who will spend the next month deciding whether they want to be represented by the Workers United Rochester Regional union. The elections involve only around 100 workers, but a vote to unionize would establish the first-ever federally recognized union among the 8,000 corporate-run locations in the US.

The unionization drive has drawn significant attention from Starbucks's corporate management. For the last two months, high-level executives have been sent to stores across New York state and extra workers were sent to locations that were part of the organizing drive. They were also pressured to attend meetings in which company representatives warned that organizing could result in the loss of benefits.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the company has faced pressure from employees, who were dubbed “essential” and unable to work from home, for better wages and safer work conditions. In March 2020, Starbucks was forced to temporarily close thousands of its stores after workers threatened to walk out over growing health concerns. The company also promised to raise its median wage to \$15 an hour by the end of 2022.

The events in Buffalo reflect a growing opposition among Starbucks workers and broad sections of the American working class. Service workers were particularly impacted by the pandemic—millions of

retail and food service jobs were among the first to go during 2020's wave of mass layoffs. Workers who kept their jobs were forced to endure longer hours and understaffing, while being patronized as “essential workers.”

However, if workers vote to bring in a union at Starbucks, it will immediately betray their demands. The SEIU's record during the pandemic reveals its allegiance to corporate interests in keeping down wage demands and misdirecting social anger.

In July, the SEIU called off a strike by 1,500 Pennsylvania nursing home workers at the last minute after reaching a tentative agreement with hospital owners. That same month, Workers United unilaterally imposed a sellout contract that had just been rejected by 460 packaging workers at an Amcor plant in Terre Haute, Indiana. The contract, the second union-backed deal that workers rejected, contains wage increases well below inflation. Terre Haute, ironically, is the birthplace of the pioneering American socialist and labor leader Eugene Debs.

According to recent filings from the Department of Labor, the top six officials at the Workers United Rochester Joint board, the organization spearheading the Starbucks drive, make close to \$100,000 a year; the average hourly wage for a Starbucks barista is between \$9.25 and \$14.50. Rather than representing workers' interests, the corporatist unions are composed of layers from the top 10 percent in American society.

This stands in stark contrast to President Biden's depiction of unions as the principal defenders of the rights of working people. Throughout the pandemic, trade unions have isolated workers' struggles and worked alongside governments to enact disastrous reopening policies. Biden has deliberately promoted the unions as a means of getting under control the growing

movement by workers for better wages and working conditions, which is taking the form increasingly of a rebellion against the union bureaucracy.

Meanwhile, Starbucks has taken the campaign very seriously. While it has no reason to be concerned that Workers United will do anything to organize a struggle, the response to the campaign is an indication of the growing unrest among the company's workforce. When the union campaign started at the end of August, Rossann Williams, vice president of US and Canada retail, flew to Buffalo and spent large amounts of time visiting stores. They held what they called "listening sessions" with workers that the company and workers said focused on union issues.

After the visits, Williams sent workers a letter threatening that unionization "could impact your work life for years and change our culture forever." Issues such as staffing, training, pay, and other grievances workers have "can only be solved by us, from within Starbucks," she said.

The company summoned billionaire and former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz to speak with western New York employees at a "partner event" Saturday evening in a downtown Buffalo hotel. Schultz, who was chairman and CEO of Starbucks from 1986 to 2000 and later from 2008 to 2017, has spoken out against unions before.

Starbucks closed 20 Buffalo-area stores early for workers to participate at Schultz's event. The speech was closed to the media, but workers reported Schultz' bizarre and rambling comments compared the company giving employees benefits to prisoners at concentration camps during the Holocaust sharing the few blankets they had.

"Not everyone, but most people shared their blanket with five other people," said Schultz. "So much of that story is threaded into what we've tried to do at Starbucks—is share our blanket."

In a letter to employees, after the speech, Schultz told workers that he envisioned Starbucks as a "for-profit company imbued with love, social conscience and shared success based on shared responsibility."

"No partner has ever needed to have a representative seek to obtain things we all have as partners at Starbucks. And I am saddened and concerned to hear anyone thinks that is needed now."

Starbucks workers must recognize they are not only

in a struggle against the corporation, but also be on guard against the union's attempt to take advantage of their genuine outrage.

Instead, workers across the country and the world are working to establish genuine organizations of the working-class struggle, rank-and-file committees independent of the corporatist unions and both capitalist parties.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact