

Amazon Labor Union withdraws Staten Island certification petition

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On Friday, November 12, the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) withdrew its petition to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to schedule a union certification election at Amazon's large warehouse complex on Staten Island, New York. The withdrawal came in response to the NLRB's statement that the ALU had submitted an insufficient number of signatures on its petition and therefore had not met the requirements for scheduling an election.

The ALU had spent six months gathering approximately 1,650 signatures. It claimed that this number represented 30 percent of Amazon's Staten Island labor force, which it said totaled 5,500 workers. Submission of the signatures of at least 30 percent of workers is the minimum required to trigger an NLRB-supervised election. Unions typically submit signatures from a much higher proportion of the workforce, 50 percent or more, as a cushion against signatures that may be disqualified. A union needs to win the votes of more than 50 percent of the workers to be recognized as their official representative. Nevertheless, the NLRB initially accepted the petition from the ALU as meeting the minimum requirements necessary to move forward to a certification vote.

Amazon countered that the complex actually employs more than 9,600 workers, thus putting the union's signature total well below the required minimum of 2,880. The company has further claimed that many of the submitted signatures are from workers no longer employed there, which is a testament to the brutal working conditions that result in a tremendous "churn" in the workforce.

The effort to establish a union at the Amazon facility was initiated by Christian (Chris) Smalls, a former Amazon employee who had been fired for leading a protest against working conditions at the start of the

pandemic. Smalls has vowed to continue the fight for certification. So far, however, news accounts indicate that the union has submitted only 400 additional signatures, which is still far short of the minimum to initiate an NLRB-sponsored election.

The withdrawal of the ALU's petition illustrates how distant the organization is from the workers that it proposes to organize. Moreover, the union's apparent lack of knowledge about the number of workers at the facility raises questions about the organization's competence. A further indication of its lack of political perspective is the offer of "Free Weed and Food" that it made to gain more signatures after having withdrawn the petition.

Only a few days after the ALU withdrew its NLRB petition, on Monday, November 15, in a clearly vindictive move, Amazon and the owner of the Staten Island property where the complex is located sent the New York police to arrest Smalls and at least one other organizer at a location where they had been conducting their campaign for months. The police did not explain the basis for the arrest nor read them their Miranda rights. Those arrested were reportedly released after a couple of hours in detention. It is unclear whether any charges have been filed.

While the *World Socialist Web Site* has clear political differences with Smalls and the ALU, we condemn in the strongest terms this blatant attempt at intimidation, which is aimed against the entire working class. The ALU has every right to campaign freely and present its case to Amazon workers.

Smalls, a former Amazon employee, began the effort to establish a union at the Staten Island facility after the company fired him for leading a protest against working conditions at the start of the pandemic. He and others have presented the organizing effort as a

grassroots movement, in contrast to the earlier failed effort to unionize the Amazon facility in Bessemer, Alabama, by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). He had criticized that attempt for taking a “top-down” approach. The high-profile campaign received statements of support from Democratic and Republican politicians, including President Biden and right-wing Senator Marco Rubio, but failed to speak to the actual needs of the workers, who overwhelmingly rejected the RWDSU. Only 13 percent of workers voted in favor of unionization.

Smalls further claims that his organization was independent of existing unions, even though he explicitly accepts their support. He 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.”

Like the RWDSU to which it claims to offer an alternative, the ALU has not presented workers with a detailed set of specific demands. Smalls claimed that having a union would automatically improve the wretched conditions suffered by Amazon workers. No explanation was provided as to how these improvements would be achieved. As at Bessemer, workers were left to wonder what concretely they would gain by affiliating with this organization in a struggle against one of the richest and most powerful corporations in the world.

Given the nightmarish conditions suffered by Amazon workers, only a genuine organizing effort that offers a clear, political perspective based on uniting and mobilizing the working class, both nationally and internationally, around a socialist program would resonate with the fundamental needs of workers. Such a campaign would gain wide support, even against much stronger resistance by Amazon than it has so far mounted, as, for example, on the level employed by the auto and steel companies in their struggle against unionization during the 1930s.

Smalls has presented the novelty of the ALU as an advantage, but the union “reform” movement itself has a history. It uses “worker-led alternatives” to tie Amazon workers to the corporatist unions and the Democratic Party. One such group is Amazonians

United, which has mounted several limited efforts to address worker concerns in the Chicago area. However, as with the ALU, this group receives support from and is entirely subservient to the Democrats and their pseudo-left affiliates, such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). In a glaring example of the duplicitous role played by organizations orbiting the Democrats, the DSA’s de facto organ, *Jacobin* magazine, while praising “independent” organizing efforts, has also expressed support for the proposed unionization drive at Amazon by one of the most corrupt and anti-working-class “unions”—the Teamsters.

Workers need organizations but not the right wing, pro-capitalist “unions” or pseudo independent unions like ALU that seek to suppress the growing struggles of the working class. These organizations are only capable of leading workers to defeat after defeat.

Workers need truly independent, fighting organizations controlled by the workers themselves and animated by a clear socialist program. The first step in this process is the formation of rank-and-file committees in every industry as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), following the lead of the Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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