

National Labor Relations Board orders new union election at Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama

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On Monday, the Atlanta regional office of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that Amazon had violated election statutes during a unionization drive earlier this year at its BHM1 fulfillment center in Bessemer, Alabama. The ruling allows for a re-vote at the facility.

The move is not a victory for the democratic rights of workers, but a new development in the intervention by the American state to prop up the authority of the union bureaucracy. In the election earlier this year, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU)'s effort to unionize BHM1's nearly 6,000 workers went down to a massive defeat, with the retail union only gaining "yes" votes from 13 percent of the entire workforce. This was despite wall-to-wall media coverage of the campaign and high-profile political support from Democratic President Joe Biden, the Bernie Sanders wing of the Democratic Party as well as representatives of the Republican Party.

The RWDSU was unable, and in fact pointedly refused, to make any serious appeal to the opposition among workers to terrible conditions at the e-commerce giant, including low pay, the spread of coronavirus and the infamous electronically-enforced speedup pioneered at Amazon in which workers routinely injure themselves trying to "make rate." While celebrities and Democratic politicians flocked to Bessemer from around the country, the campaign had almost no involvement from rank-and-file workers inside the plant.

Media commentators have cast doubt on whether the second vote will prove different than the first failed attempt. The *Washington Post* notes comments from Rutgers University labor studies professor Rebecca Givan, who believes "there is nothing to suggest that the outcome will be different than in the first election."

In the Monday ruling, the NLRB's regional representative ruled that by installing a mailbox for collecting ballots on its property, Amazon had sent a "dangerous and improper message" to BHM1 employees by giving the "impression

that it controlled the process" by which votes were gathered. "I specifically disapproved of the employer's suggestions for making voting 'easier' because the employer is neither responsible for conducting elections nor is it tasked or authorized to aid the process," stated the NLRB's regional director Lisa Y. Henderson.

The ruling echoes a hearing officer's previous finding that the mailbox's installation "destroyed the laboratory conditions" under which the election was proceeding. The NLRB ordered a new election, with an additional notice sent to all employees informing them that the previous election had been ruled invalid due to the employer's actions.

RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum celebrated the ruling, declaring "[t]oday's decision confirms what we were saying all along — that Amazon's intimidation and interference prevented workers from having a fair say in whether they wanted a union in their workplace." The RWDSU leader further proclaimed, "Amazon workers deserve to have a voice at work, which can only come from a union." Amazon has indicated that it will appeal the regional director's ruling to the national NLRB in Washington, D.C.

The claim, endlessly repeated in the liberal and pseudo-left press, that the infamous on-site mailbox substantially contributed to the result is simply not credible. Historically, the unions, particularly in the United States, were formed not in "laboratory conditions," but against bitter opposition from management. The state, almost without exception, sided with management and employed the full force of the courts, police and even military to suppress and contain a growing movement within the working class. But the unions, based on a reactionary "America First" nationalism and acceptance of the "right" of the companies to profits, have long ago been transformed from defensive organizations of the working class into a labor police force and businesses in their own rights, controlling assets in the billions of dollars.

This is why the American state has directly intervened on

behalf of the RWDSU in an attempt to provide the RWDSU with a second chance to overcome apathy and indifference generated by its own campaign. Biden is seeking to use the unions to place workers under a form of corporate and state guardianship, under conditions of the most explosive growth of social anger in the United States in 40 years.

Throughout Biden's presidency, his administration has sought to prop up the authority of these corrupt organizations, increasingly discredited among workers themselves. This includes Biden's de-facto endorsement of the RWDSU at Bessemer, staking both his personal prestige and that of his office on a campaign which ended in disaster, as well as sending two cabinet-level secretaries to the picket lines last month at John Deere and Kellogg's.

Even if the second vote succeeds, the RWDSU would immediately seek to become the company's partner in jointly enforcing the conditions which already exist, and even worse. In the past two months, the unions around the country have played the key role in shutting down what was hailed as "Striketober," preventing strikes by 60,000 film production workers in the IATSE union and 32,000 Kaiser Permanente health care workers on the West Coast and isolating and shutting down a strike at John Deere. In each of these cases, the unions ran roughshod over the democratic will of workers, ignoring strike authorization votes and, in the case of the Hollywood production workers and Deere, forcing through contracts which a majority of the membership had voted down.

Only a day after the shutdown of the Deere strike by the United Auto Workers, Biden visited Detroit for a photo-op with UAW president Ray Curry. The UAW's top leadership has been decimated by a corruption scandal which has led to the indictment of a dozen top officials, including two former presidents. Curry himself was revealed the week prior to Biden's visit to have been investigated for accepting improper gifts from a union contractor.

While the UAW is now under a consent agreement with the federal government, at no point did investigators raise concerns about the destruction of the "laboratory conditions" of the UAW's contract negotiations with the Big Three automakers by systematic bribes, and the contracts negotiated by officials now serving prison sentences have remained in force.

Finally, the unions have played the critical role in maintaining production throughout the continued spread of the pandemic. Their role is particularly catastrophic in the meatpacking industry, where RWDSU has substantial membership. During the first wave of COVID-19 in the United States, the RWDSU forced its members to stay on the job even as the deadly disease killed workers at a Tyson's food plant in Georgia. At least 298 workers have died in the

meatpacking industry, according to the Food and Environment Reporting Network, an investigative reporting outlet.

Similarly, while the *Washington Post* claims "[t]he RWDSU has maintained a presence in Bessemer even after the lopsided loss last spring," the retail organization has maintained radio silence about the death of a worker at BHM1 who collapsed at the job a month after its failed vote drive. Calls by the *World Socialist Web Site* to its national and local field offices went unanswered at the time.

If the RWDSU got in the Bessemer warehouse it would be enforcing Amazon's dictates no less.

The NLRB ruling comes amid an escalating campaign by the unions at Amazon. Last month's election of Sean O'Brien to the Teamsters presidency, a notorious thug and ex-factional ally of his predecessor James Hoffa Jr., is part of the union bureaucracy's attempt to provide a "fresh face" for its major initiative to establish a presence at Amazon.

O'Brien's credibility as a "reformer" despite his actual record is due to the support he received from pseudo-left groups such as Teamsters for a Democratic Union and the *Labor Notes* publication, which absurdly presented his election as a turning point in the gangster-ridden history of the Teamsters. O'Brien will also be able to rely on his connections with the Biden White House through Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh, a former union official and mayor of Boston.

In opposition to these reactionary diversions, workers must form their own independent rank-and-file workers committees, demanding democratic control of work conditions as well as necessary safety precautions amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Amazon workers in Baltimore have already begun this, seeking to unite their struggles with other Amazonians and workers throughout the world.

Rank-and-file committees will also fight to pierce through the information blackout on the spread of COVID-19 inside Amazon facilities. A report by the Strategic Organizing Center has found that Amazon reported only 27 work-related cases of "respiratory conditions" for all of 2020, even as the company publicly admitted to 20,000 cases by October of 2020. "This means that Amazon claimed to OSHA that almost none of the tens of thousands of COVID-19 infections among its workers were work-related, an accomplishment so extraordinary as to be unbelievable," the SOC concludes.



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