

Unionization vote passes at Starbucks in Buffalo, New York

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A Workers United unionization drive at three Starbucks coffee shops in and around Buffalo, New York succeeded in establishing the first union at a company-owned Starbucks in the US last Thursday. Out of the 27 workers at the Elmwood Avenue store, 19 voted for unionization with Workers United, which is an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

Workers at a second location in nearby Hamburg, New York voted 12-8 against joining the union. The vote at a third store in Cheektowaga, another Buffalo suburb, was 15-9 in favor of unionization, but there were seven challenged ballots, so the result of the vote remains in limbo pending a review by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

Union organizers at the three stores initially filed petitions with the NLRB in early September. Starbucks workers had complained of severe problems with understaffing, overwork and faulty machinery even before the pandemic began. Workers are regularly under time pressure to fulfill complicated orders that customers place online in quick succession. Many employees in the Buffalo area work at more than one store depending on demand, and Starbucks wants to retain the flexibility to move them between locations.

Starbucks workers, whom the company patronizingly calls “partners,” have clashed with corporate management throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. When the virus began spreading across the US in early 2020, the company took little action to protect workers and left its 8,000 company-owned US stores open until a threatened walkout forced Starbucks to temporarily offer hazard pay and promise wage increases.

Starbucks’s corporate management had made a concerted effort over the last four months to press workers into rejecting unionization. High-level executives were flown across the continent to stores across New York state. Extra staff were sent to locations that were part of the organizing drive, and workers were pressured to attend meetings where company representatives threatened the elimination of benefits.

At the same time, the drive to bring in Workers United in Buffalo was afforded substantial attention and resources by the union bureaucracy.

Closely overseeing the campaign was Richard Bensinger, the former national organizing director for the AFL-CIO union

federation and founder of its Organizing Institute. Since stepping down from his official role at the AFL-CIO in the late 1990s, Bensinger has served as a highly paid consultant to a number of unions, including Workers United, SEIU, the United Auto Workers, the Amalgamated Transit Union and others. According to union filings with the Department of Labor, Bensinger received over \$4.8 million in payments since 2005 for his services.

Despite the small number of workers involved, the unionization drive in Buffalo has drawn substantial attention in the national press. In an article on the vote Thursday, the *New York Times* wrote that the establishment of a union at one Starbucks café is “an important symbolic victory for labor at a time when workers across the country are expressing frustration with wages and working conditions.”

The reality, however, is that the union drive at Starbucks is not the product of rank-and-file anger, but an intense campaign by the Democratic Party and its associated media outlets to shore up support for the pro-corporate trade unions, which they view as a bulwark against the growth of the class struggle.

The unionization vote was hailed as “historic” by a number of high-level Democratic Party politicians. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer—known as the “senator from Wall Street” for his long subservience to financial interests—wrote on Twitter after the announcement: “Congratulations to @SBWorkersUnited on their groundbreaking effort in solidarity and proving Buffalo is and always will be a union town. Next up: fair contract!”

Marty Walsh, the Biden administration’s secretary of labor and himself a former union bureaucrat, tweeted, “Congratulations to these Starbucks workers in Buffalo on their historic win. Unions gave my family peace of mind and access to the American dream, and it’s good to see more workers organizing to secure better pay and benefits.”

Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who had met with Starbucks union organizers in Buffalo last month, wrote, “Hell yeah! Nothing like the smell of union coffee in the morning.”

On Monday, a few days before the unionization vote results were announced, Senator Bernie Sanders hosted a livestream town hall with members of the Buffalo-area Starbucks union

organizing committee, where he claimed workers across the US were beginning to stand up and demand union representation.

“We are going, in the next few weeks and months, to be focusing on the needs and struggles of working people, and we’re going to take a hard look at the increasing level of unionization activities that we’re now seeing all across this country,” he said at the town hall.

Sanders engaged in his standard fake-left demagogy, contrasting Starbucks’ vast profits over the past year with the poverty-level wages the company pays its workers, while presenting the union campaign at Starbucks as a “major breakthrough for all workers in the low-wage service industry as a whole.”

Under the Biden administration, the Democratic Party, with the support of its pseudo-left adjuncts such as the Democratic Socialists of America, has carried out a virtually unprecedented effort to shore up support for the trade unions. Earlier this year, Biden lent his official backing to a unionization drive by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama. Despite wall-to-wall media coverage and endorsements from major politicians and celebrities, the union was unable to garner any substantial support, with only 13 percent of workers at the facility voting in favor.

However, in a sign of the importance with which the White House views the matter, Biden’s NLRB has ordered a new vote at Bessemer, claiming Amazon destroyed the “laboratory conditions” of the election by installing a mailbox to collect ballots on its premises.

The pressures facing Starbucks workers and others in service and retail are genuine, and an organized response is required to wage successful struggles in the future. However, workers cannot entrust these fights to the corporatist unions and the Democratic Party.

The promotion of the unions as supposed vehicles for struggle is part of the Biden administration’s corporatist strategy, aimed at using the “unions” to counter the expanding movement of rank-and-file workers and subordinate the working class to the demands of the corporate-financial elite.

For four decades, the unions have suppressed strikes and other struggles and overseen a disastrous decline in workers’ living standards, while the upper-middle-class union executives and bureaucrats have grown increasingly wealthy. Indeed, the wages throughout the country would not be so appallingly low were it not for the collaboration of the unions in slashing workers’ income throughout large sections of key industries, such as in the auto industry, where wages for all new hires were cut in half in an agreement between the Big Three, the UAW and the Obama administration in 2009.

The SEIU, the parent organization of Workers United, has played a particularly nefarious role in betraying workers’ struggles. 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. Workers United itself has trampled on the rights of its members, unilaterally imposing a sellout contract on 460 Amcor packaging workers in Indiana earlier this year which they had twice voted to reject.

The American ruling class is extremely concerned with the growth of opposition in the working class, particularly the growing rebellion against the unions, expressed in a series of overwhelming rejections of union-backed contracts. Approximately 1,400 workers have been on strike at four Kellogg’s plants across the US for more than two months. Workers have also taken action at John Deere, Volvo Trucks, snack makers Mondelez and Frito-Lay, and elsewhere.

In a number of these struggles, workers have set up new organizations, rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, in order to fight for their interests in opposition to both the companies and the unions. These committees have sought to overcome the information blackouts and isolation imposed by the unions, appealing to broader sections of workers in the US and internationally to mobilize in a common struggle for higher wages and safe working conditions.

Contrary to the pro-corporate unions, which tirelessly defend the companies’ profit interests, insisting that they cannot afford decent wages, these rank-and-file committees have raised demands based on what workers actually need, including raises exceeding inflation, the restoration of previous concessions given up by the unions, and workers’ oversight of health and safety measures during the pandemic.

The success of Starbucks workers’ future struggles will come not through the top-down, state-backed imposition of the union bureaucracies, but rather through the formation of organizations from below, democratically controlled and run by Starbucks workers themselves.



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