

National Labor Relations Board agreement expands union access to Amazon workers

Nick Barrickman
28 December 2021

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) announced last week that it had reached a settlement with Amazon to grant unions more access to its workers at the company's more than 100 fulfillment centers, delivery stations and other facilities across the United States.

The settlement is based upon the rulings from six lawsuits filed against Amazon by various organizations that have sought to unionize warehouses. According to the written agreement, Amazon is required to post notices for a period of at least "60 consecutive days" at its facilities, informing employees that they have a right to "form, join, or assist a union" drive on Amazon's properties.

In addition to posting notices in its facilities about the right to join a union, the company is also required to send electronic notices through its work scheduling app and email hundreds of thousands of individuals who have worked for the company since March 22, 2021.

According to the settlement, Amazon "will not do anything to prevent [workers] from exercising the above rights." The company must allow off-duty workers involved with union activities access to non-work areas where other off-duty workers congregate, including break rooms. Workers involved in union activities will also be allowed to talk to workers in company-owned parking lots without being thrown out. Several union-aligned groups complained that Amazon's refusal to allow them to campaign beyond 15 minutes before or after a shift had prevented them from reaching workers.

NLRB general counsel Jennifer Abruzzo praised the deal as a great victory for workers. "This settlement agreement provides a crucial commitment from Amazon to millions of its workers across the United States that it will not interfere with their right to act

collectively to improve their workplace by forming a union or taking other collective action."

In comments to the *New York Times*, Wilma B. Liebman, former NLRB chief during the Obama administration, said the agreement was a "big deal" and that "[i]t sends a signal that this general counsel is really serious about enforcing the law."

The NLRB did not make this decision to strengthen workers in their fight against exploitation by the giant logistics firm. On the contrary, the Biden administration is trying to preempt a rebellion by hundreds of thousands of workers against Amazon by installing a pro-company union, which can be relied on to contain opposition and strangle it within the confines of American system of labor-management relations.

This is a critical question for the Biden administration. Amazon is the US's second largest employer with nearly a million workers in the US and 1.5 million worldwide. The corporation is a strategic cog in the global supply chain through its various logistics hubs, cloud providers, government contracts and more.

Biden hopes to use the unions to suppress workers' demands for improved wages and working conditions and counter the growing political radicalization of the working class against social inequality and sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of lives for corporate profit during the pandemic. The White House has relied on the American Federation of Teachers, the United Auto Workers and other unions to keep schools and non-essential businesses open amid surges in COVID-19.

At the same time, the Biden administration is seeking to fully integrate the union apparatus into the structure of the US government as it prepares for trade war and military confrontation with China, Russia and other countries.

The NLRB's ruling comes weeks after the federal labor agency called for a new election at Amazon's BHM1 fulfillment center in Bessemer, Alabama. The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) filed a complaint against Amazon after the humiliating defeat of its unionization campaign in Alabama.

The RWDSU only garnered the vote of 738 workers, or about 13 percent of the warehouse's nearly 6,000 employees. This was despite the fact that the RWDSU had the fulsome support from both President Biden's White House, leaders in the Democratic Party and media, and even sections of the Republican Party.

The RWDSU claimed its loss was due to Amazon installing a ballot box on its property, which "destroyed the laboratory conditions" of the vote because workers might believe the company was counting their ballots.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time that the RWDSU's effort to blame its debacle on a "strange mailbox" was "an explanation that could only be given by wealthy executives with no connection to the working class and the class struggle."

Throughout the course of its campaign, RWDSU failed to raise a single demand to improve the facility, whether this was to oppose dangerous working conditions, workers being forced to forego bathroom breaks in order to "make rate," or grueling and long work hours. This is because the entire campaign was based on establishing a collaborative relationship with the corporation based on the defense of its profit interests.

The RWDSU's real attitude to the BHM1 workers was driven home by its silence in response to the death of an employee at the facility just a month after the unionization vote. Since that time, at least two other BHM1 workers have died. According to the multimedia website *Mashable* last week, "[t]wo Amazon workers from [the] Bessemer, Alabama facility died last month, one of them suffering a stroke not long after his request to go home was denied." Workers at BHM1 said "work continued as normal despite the deaths."

The RWDSU was given a second chance to run an election at BHM1 "the same day one of the Bessemer warehouse workers allegedly died." But the RWDSU has no intention of fighting the conditions that led to the deaths of the Bessemer Amazon workers, any more

than the previous deaths which occurred among its members, including Tyson poultry workers in Camilla, Georgia who died of COVID-19 in the early days of the pandemic.

If the RWDSU or other unions were able to eventually gain a foothold at the e-commerce giant with the help of the government, rank-and-file workers would soon face a struggle not only against Amazon but against an organization that was "union" in name but a tool of corporate management in reality.

Rather than allowing their struggles to be suppressed, Amazon workers should follow the lead of the Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was formed last year independently of the official trade union apparatus and political parties of big business. This organization is formed "of, for, and led by Amazon workers which will defend the rights and safety of our fellow employees" and supports "every move by workers to protest, strike and organize in resistance to Amazon's exploitative practices." We encourage Amazon workers to join and build rank-and-file committees in every workplace and unite with logistics workers in the US and around the world to begin a genuine fight back against the corporation.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact