

As union vote in Amazon continues

How Amazon workers can fight to defend their interests

International Amazon Workers Voice
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Six thousand Amazon workers at the BHM1 fulfillment center in Bessemer, Alabama are currently voting on whether to bring in the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). The voting began on February 4 and will continue through March 25.

This election is a do-over of the election held last year around this time, in which only 738 out of 5,800 workers voted for the union. The Biden administration's National Labor Relations Board, the federal agency that regulates union activity, subsequently ordered the election to be repeated, determining that a ballot mailbox on Amazon property and other efforts by management to discourage workers from voting "yes" violated US labor laws and regulations.

The campaign to bring the RWDSU in at Amazon arises not from a rank-and-file rebellion of the working class, but from strategic calculations of the ruling class.

There is no shortage of opposition among Amazon workers to the dangerous and exploitative conditions they face. Amazon has perfected a psychologically manipulative workplace regime that combines tracking and surveillance to pressure its employees to "make rate," working as fast as possible. In this environment, injuries are rampant. In only one warehouse, the IAWV documented 567 serious injuries over a two-year period from 2017 to 2018.

After they are injured, workers are pushed into the workers compensation system, which is weighted against workers, and which functions to deny them treatment and compensation and minimize their injuries. Other workers simply burn out from exhaustion, with one study finding a 150 percent turnover rate among "warehouse associates" in a single year. A common saying among Amazon workers is, "We are not robots!"

With the COVID-19 outbreak at the beginning of 2020, Amazon kept workers at their stations with minimal and cosmetic safety precautions. During the pandemic, tens of thousands contracted the virus. Amazon continues to conceal the extent of infections and deaths from its workers in an effort to lull them into a false sense of security.

The role of the RWDSU

Bringing in the RWDSU, however, will resolve none of the burning issues facing Amazon workers. As during the first vote, the union is advancing no demands in relation to wages or working conditions in the plant. Indeed, the campaign is backed by powerful sections of the political establishment as a means of strangling and blocking a rank-and-file rebellion at Amazon.

While the RWDSU campaign found relatively lukewarm support among Amazon workers in Bessemer last year, winning over only 13 percent of the workforce, the campaign continues to enjoy the full support of the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, the trade union bureaucracy, the media establishment, and even sections of the Republican Party.

The promotion of the unions is one of the Biden administration's central policies, a fact underscored earlier this month by the release of a report by the White House Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment—a blueprint for the corporatist integration of the unions with the state and corporate management.

The 45-page report includes a specific reference to the Amazon unionization campaign in Bessemer, citing RWDSU President Stuart Applebaum as saying, "This is the most pro-union statement from a president in United States history." The report notes that the RWDSU is "organizing to represent workers in Bessemer, Alabama."

Applebaum himself has had a long career as what amounts to a government operative, embedded for decades in the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, including overseas operations in the service of US imperialism. He is on the board of Freedom House, which is a right-wing propaganda arm of the US government, and he is also on the Executive Committee of the Democratic National Committee and chairs the DNC Labor Council.

The Biden administration has been joined by sections of the Republican Party, represented chiefly by fascist Florida senator Marco Rubio, who endorsed the RWDSU campaign in March.

The Biden administration, the Democratic Party, the union bureaucracy, sections of the Republican Party, and the Wall Street interests they serve see the official unions as key to containing and channeling the potentially explosive eruption of industrial struggles among Amazon workers, who currently number 1.5 million worldwide.

A further factor in the Biden administration's campaign to strengthen the AFL-CIO apparatus over the working class is the ruling class's preparation for war. In the event of a major "great power conflict," and in particular war with Russia, the pro-capitalist unions will be critical in promoting national chauvinism. War abroad requires a disciplined "labor movement" at home.

Over the past several decades, and in particular since the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic, the AFL-CIO has played a key role in blocking and obstructing workers' struggles. The unions failed to lift a finger to protect workers from the outbreak of the deadly pandemic, and the teachers' unions in particular were instrumental in actively forcing teachers to return to work. Union and non-union alike, workers in America were herded into unsafe workplaces and schools, where they contracted the deadly disease by the millions.

Amazon has certainly opposed the unionization drive with all the means at its disposal. The oligarchs at the head of the monopolistic global conglomerate believe that they can do a better job of policing their own workforce than the unions can. Doubtless intoxicated by wealth and profits hardly precedented in world history, Amazon management resents what it must view as trespassing by the Biden administration and the union bureaucracy on its property.

However, if a union were to be brought in, Amazon would adapt and integrate the union into its apparatus, just as it has in Europe, where it employs unionized workers who are subjected to similar wages and working conditions as non-union workers.

Nor does the Amazon Labor Union, which is seeking to organize workers in New York, offer a way forward. While it has billed itself as an "independent" and "worker-led" organization, the ALU has trumpeted the backing it has from "countless labor organizations, politicians, news media, and established unions."

ALU leader Chris Smalls has promoted the effort of the Teamsters—an organization no less corrupt and integrated with management than the RWDSU—to install itself in Amazon. Rather than seeking to develop a rank-and-file rebellion of workers through the formation of genuinely independent organizations of class struggle, the ALU is selling itself to the existing union apparatus.

A struggle of Amazon workers must be waged! The pandemic has enormously intensified the brutal conditions of exploitation among Amazon workers throughout the world, along with all sections of the working class.

Whatever the outcome of the RWDSU re-vote, workers face the urgent necessity of establishing independent, rank-and-file organizations to fight for their interests, such as the committee already formed by Amazon workers at the BW12 warehouse in Baltimore, Maryland.

These organizations must be based on the principle of class struggle, not class collaboration. They must be democratically controlled by the workers themselves, not subject to the dictates of union executives who benefit off the exploitation of the workers they claim to represent.

The WSWS and the *International Amazon Workers' Voice* call on all Amazon workers to join and build an Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Committee to fight against the oppressive workplace atmosphere, the hated "rate" system and "time off task" harassment. Amazon workers need wages adequate for a comfortable standard of living, effective countermeasures to ensure Zero Covid transmission in the workplace, the elimination of injuries, and full compensation and care for workers who have already been injured.

Moreover, in any struggle against the corporation, Amazon workers could rally the support of their class brothers and sisters in adjacent industries—including among teachers, who have been frog-marched into superspreading classrooms around the world in the middle of a pandemic; among the 30,000 oil workers whose union is blocking a strike against the hated American oil industry; among the tens of thousands of BNSF railway workers whom the courts are desperately attempting to prevent from striking; and among countless others.

The *International Amazon Workers Voice* stands ready to assist Amazon workers around the world in the formation of rank-and-file committees. If you are an Amazon worker, contact us today to join a committee at your workplace or to begin the process of building one.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

Build Rank-and-File Committees at Amazon!