

The questions confronting Amazon workers in New York amid upcoming union vote

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More than 6,000 workers at Staten Island's JFK8 warehouse—Amazon's main fulfillment center servicing New York City—will vote at the end of the month on whether or not to unionize under the Amazon Labor Union (ALU). The voting period will be from March 25 to March 30, overlapping with the conclusion of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) revote of the Amazon BHM1 fulfillment center in Bessemer, Alabama.

The ALU will also hold an election at Amazon's LDJ5 sorting warehouse, which is across the street from JFK8, in the near future. A recent ALU newsletter states, "Soon enough, we will have union elections at all four of the Staten Island facilities, and then at warehouses all over the country."

Both at Amazon and across the world, workers are looking for a way to fight against hyper-exploitation and dangerous working conditions, soaring inflation and the threat of world war. But workers face not only management and ultra-wealthy billionaires like Jeff Bezos, but the trade unions which have been integrated with management and have spent decades enforcing concessions and sabotaging workers' struggles. The yawning chasm between rank-and-file workers and well-heeled union bureaucrats produced a debacle in last year's union vote at Bessemer. Under conditions where the RWDSU refused to even raise any demands, workers overwhelmingly voted down the union because they saw no advantage to bringing in this bureaucratic organization.

In the aftermath of the first vote, Chris Smalls, the fired JFK8 manager who leads the ALU, made certain criticisms of the RWDSU's campaign and presented the ALU as a democratic alternative. At JFK8, the ALU is calling for pay raises, paid sick leave, job security and a free shuttle service to work, with Smalls proclaiming, "[T]he sky's the limit when you're in the union."

But the ALU provides no strategy or perspective for how this will be achieved. In fact, Smalls and the ALU have no strategy at all. Despite their veneer of independence, the ALU has close ties with the RWDSU and the officialdom in the existing unions as a whole, who have deliberately promoted them as a "democratic" prop to shore up the legitimacy of the unions at Amazon.

If workers vote to bring them in, they will quickly find that the ALU, like countless earlier experiments with "democratic unionism," is no different than its bigger brothers in the AFL-CIO. It will quickly seek to an arrangement with Amazon management which secures its role as joint enforcer of concessions and brutal working conditions.

Regardless of how the vote plays out, the central question which workers confront is how and on what basis they can establish their own power and initiative and fight for their own demands. The way

forward is not through the reform of the outmoded, pro-corporate unions, but the development of a new movement based on internationalism and the independence of the working class from the corporate parties and their trade union lackeys.

Why is Biden promoting the unions?

The Biden administration styles itself as the "most pro-union administration in American history." Last year, Biden made a personal intervention on behalf of the RWDSU at Amazon, which had little effect on the outcome. An experienced capitalist politician, Biden is seeking to use the services of the unions in order to discipline the working class. Indeed, the White House "Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment" which he founded last year includes Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas. In a report published last month, the task force explained that a key interest of the federal government in promoting the unions is to "minimize disruption of services and goods procured by the federal government."

In recent months, the government has openly used the unions as part of a general offensive against working class opposition. Last month, a judge issued an injunction banning 17,000 BNSF railroad workers from striking against a new appalling attendance policy, on the basis of protecting national supply chains. The response of the railroad unions has been to dutifully enforce this injunction, preventing workers even from speaking to the media.

Meanwhile, the United Steelworkers (USW) union is ramming through a contract for 30,000 oil refinery workers which it brags is a "responsible contract" and "does not add to inflationary pressures"—that is, it contains massive cuts to real wages. The deal, suddenly announced shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the associated spike in oil prices, was worked out with the personal involvement of Biden himself. Meanwhile the USW is doing its part in promoting pro-war, anti-Russian hysteria.

Is the ALU really "independent" from the established trade unions?

The ALU claims to be "independent" from the established trade

unions. In fact, the ALU has been cultivated by the existing trade union bureaucracy. RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum said last year, “If Chris runs out of money, we’d support them and not look for anything in return.” The ALU’s own website states that they are “joined in common cause with the whole labor movement of union organizers,” including “the [RWDSU] union campaigners in Bessemer, Alabama.”

Their website also prominently features an Economic Policy Institute report titled “Why unions are good for workers,” which advocates for passing legislative reforms like the PRO Act “to halt and reverse the four-decades-old trend of rising inequality and near wage stagnation for most workers.” What the report and the ALU leave out is that the unions oversaw and collaborated in this criminal and systematic slashing of wages.

In a recent radio interview with *Indy News Hour*, Smalls was asked about the support the ALU receives from and gives to other unions, to which he said, “We show support with everybody” and “I think we all have the same common goals.” Though, he quickly added that the ALU “remains independent and worker-led.”

When WSWS correspondents recently spoke to workers outside JFK8, many stated their desire to wage an organized fight against Amazon but did not see the ALU as being capable of leading this. In one thread on Reddit, a worker commented:

In no way, shape or form does [the ALU] show or provide evidence of how the union ACTUALLY plans on implementing their promises, their raising of the pay and health benefits & I’m all for it, but there’s no proof whatsoever. ... So what is the end game if Amazon disagrees to the contracts?? ... If I could see specifics, a page of explanations, SOMETHING with some direction ... I love the goals they’re after but it just seems like glitter is being thrown in our faces. ... For the record I’m not anti-union or pro-Amazon, I’m ANTI-lying to people who rely on this job to care for their families. It doesn’t seem like either [Amazon or the ALU] are [acting] in the interest of the people.

Other threads contained responses by Amazon workers recounting union betrayals (USW, UBC, SEIU) at their previous jobs, including lies, pay raises that did not keep up with inflation and leadership embezzlement charges. One worker commented, “Good unions in my area seem to be a thing of the past. ... Today most unions seem to operate more like a business than caring about the workers.”

The struggle against Amazon is a political struggle. Any serious fight to achieve even the ALU’s own demands would pit workers not just against the giant transnational corporation as a whole but also against the Biden administration.

What is needed is a national and, in fact, international struggle to force Amazon to concede to workers’ demands, uniting workers at Amazon in the United States with their brothers and sisters at Amazon in other countries in a common struggle against poverty wages and endless speedup. This is not possible under the ALU because, regardless of its claims to be “worker-led,” it is in fact a part of the union-Democratic Party apparatus, which has systematically reduced workers’ living standards for 40 years while suppressing every form of working class resistance.

What does a real struggle look like?

A real fight for workers’ demands requires first and foremost that workers clearly establish their independence from the corrupt trade unions and both pro-war parties of Wall Street, whose interests stand diametrically opposed to those of the working class. As we previously wrote:

Whatever the outcome of a future vote, the International Amazon Workers Voice (IAWV) urges workers at JFK8 and other facilities to build rank-and-file committees, which are genuinely independent of the pro-corporate unions and both big business parties.

As the IAWV wrote on the eve of the Bessemer vote, “a new orientation is needed. Where the unions promote corporatism and class collaboration, workers need an anti-capitalist perspective. Where the unions promote national chauvinism, working class internationalism is needed. Where the union proceeds from what management is willing to part with, workers must proceed from what they urgently require.”

Amazon workers in New York looking to fight against their oppressive micromanaged and heavily surveilled working conditions and for a comfortable living wage, protections from injury and the spread of COVID-19, and full compensation and medical care for workers who have already been injured should form a rank-and-file committee at JFK8. Workers in Baltimore have already established an Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee at the BW12 warehouse.

These workers organizations will be part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), a growing network of rank-and-file committees being organized and linked up internationally in different industries and workplaces, assisted by the WSWS.

The deepening crisis of capitalism is creating a growing radicalization, which has included the outbreak of many significant strikes in the past two years that have taken the form of open rebellions against the unions. The growing danger of world war, with all of its catastrophic economic and social consequences, will only further drive workers around the world into struggle. Workers must draw their strength through the unification of the vast international working class who share common interests and stand firmly opposed to war, austerity and extreme social inequality.



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