

Amazon Labor Union wins election at Amazon warehouse in New York City

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The Amazon Labor Union was declared the winner Friday in a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) contest held in Staten Island, New York. The vote covers more than 8,000 Amazon workers at the JFK8 Amazon fulfillment center, the largest warehouse in the city.

JFK8's workers voted in the ALU with 2,654 "yes" votes to 2,131 "no" votes, or a margin of close to 10 percentage points, in an election which drew out more than half of the warehouse's eligible voters. Another ALU election is planned for April 25 at the LDJ5 warehouse on Staten Island, which employs roughly 1,600 workers.

The ALU's victory came a day after results were announced for a similar union election at Amazon held in Bessemer, Alabama. The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) is losing the vote at the BHM1 fulfillment center, where it received only 875 "yes" votes to 993 "no" votes. Several hundred contested ballots are currently being litigated, and the result will be announced by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) within the next few weeks.

The highly depressed turnout (only 39 percent) for the Alabama vote came despite glowing media coverage and high-profile political support from Biden and other Democrats. Biden's NLRB allowed the RWDSU to re-run the election after an initial attempt failed.

The larger turnout at the JFK8 facility may be attributed to the fact that the ALU has promoted itself as an independent union, run by current and former Amazon workers. Christian Smalls, the ALU's leader, is a former JFK8 worker who was fired in 2020 after he and several co-workers organized a walkout in protest of Amazon's lackluster COVID-19 protections.

In another difference from the RWDSU campaign,

the ALU raised a specific set of demands of the company, including raises to \$30 an hour, more vacation days and paid time off as well as an increase in break times during shifts. Numerous investigations have revealed the widespread occurrence of workers injuring themselves in Amazon's vast warehouses as well as foregoing rest times and bathroom breaks in order to make obscenely high "rates."

A *New York Times* investigation of the JFK8 warehouse last year determined that the corporation tracked "every minute of most warehouse workers' shifts, from how fast they packed merchandise to how long they paused... If productivity flagged, Amazon's computers assumed the worker was to blame."

No doubt, many workers voting for the ALU did so out of a desire to improve their conditions and carry out a fight against the corporation and its multi-billionaire owner, Jeff Bezos.

Such a fight, however, requires the mobilization of the working class independently of the corporatist trade unions, which are heavily promoted by sections of the ruling class, particularly the Democratic Party, as critical instruments for the suppression of the class struggle. This requires the development of a network of rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by the workers themselves.

While the ALU claims to be independent, its orientation is in fact to the trade union apparatus, a section of which sees in such initiatives (at Amazon, Starbucks and other companies) a method to somehow revive support for thoroughly discredited organizations.

Tellingly, Democratic Party-connected media outlets have heaped praise on Smalls and the ALU. As it has throughout the entire Amazon unionization campaign, the *Times* led the way, declaring the JFK8 vote "a stunning win" and "one of the biggest victories for

organized labor in a generation.” The Democratic Socialists of America-aligned *Jacobin* magazine, which sees as its principal role the strengthening of the trade union apparatus, called it a “David-and-Goliath... fight between the independent union and one of the world’s most powerful companies.”

There are already numerous signs that Smalls and the ALU are open to an approach from the RWDSU or other pro-corporate organizations. Speaking to NPR about the RWDSU, Smalls declared “I hope they’re successful... We know we show our support and solidarity with them.” The RWDSU’s president Stuart Appelbaum, a longtime Democratic Party and state operative, has offered to “support them [the ALU] and not look for anything in return” if “Chris runs out of money.”

During the campaign for unionization at JFK, the ALU borrowed office space from the Unite Here, an organization (with \$150 million in assets) that has played a critical role in isolating and defeating the struggles of service workers—and keeping them on the job during the pandemic.

There is no doubt that in the aftermath of its victory at Amazon, the fledgling ALU will have more than just office space offered to it. Mary Kay Henry, the president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) quickly offered “whatever support we can” to the ALU.



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