Amazon Labor Union turns to AFL-CIO following successful vote at Staten Island warehouse

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8 April 2022

The recent vote to bring in the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) at the company's Staten Island, New York JFK8 warehouse raises critical questions of perspective for Amazon workers.

Workers want to fight to improve their conditions and oppose the brutal regime of exploitation overseen by Amazon's billionaire owner Jeff Bezos. They are alienated from and deeply skeptical of the official trade unions, which have long functioned as instruments for the suppression of the class struggle.

The successful vote by the ALU came a day after a second vote to bring in the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) at Amazon's Bessemer, Alabama warehouse received only 875 "yes" votes compared to 993 "no" votes. Turnout was even lower in this election (39 percent) than it was in the first vote last year, when the RWDSU received the support of only 13 percent of the workers.

Turnout for the Staten Island vote was under 60 percent, with 2,654 workers voting "yes" (32 percent of eligible workers) and 2,131 voting "no." A significant factor in the difference in the two votes was the effort by the ALU to disassociate itself from the existing union apparatus. The ALU also issued a specific set of demands on the company, including an increase in wages to $30 an hour from the current $18 an hour, lower production rates, more vacation days and paid time off, an increase in break times during shifts, and more COVID-19 protections.

It has not taken long, however, for the ALU to demonstrate its orientation to the AFL-CIO.

On Thursday, Smalls and ALU Vice President Derrick Palmer met in Washington D.C. with Sean O'Brien, the new president of the Teamsters, to "discuss how the Teamsters Union could help Staten Island workers win a first contract," according to a tweet from the union. The Teamsters, which previously announced its intention to "unionize" Amazon workers, is notorious for its corruption and naked collaboration with UPS and other employers against the interests of rank-and-file workers.

Smalls and Palmer then met with Sara Nelson, the president of the Association of Flight Attendants and a leading contender for president of the AFL-CIO last year.

On Friday, the ALU held a press conference in Staten Island at which Smalls said his trip to Washington was aimed at "telling these politicians" to support the ALU with money and resources. Of O'Brien, Smalls called him a "great guy," who "is going to be throwing resources at us." While insisting that the ALU remained "independent," Smalls added, "The big unions are going to support us and that's all we're asking for—resources, office space, money, whatever it takes, manpower, strike funds, lawyers, negotiators."

The support and praise being lavished on the ALU by AFL-CIO executives comes with definite conditions. They hope to utilize the ALU as a means of strengthening the discredited, pro-corporate union apparatus.

An article in the *New York Times* Thursday, "Amazon Union's Success Opens Labor Leaders' Eyes," noted that after countless defeated unionizing campaigns, sections of the AFL-CIO were concluding it was better for them to hide in the shadows. "We have to be homegrown—we have to be driven by workers—to give ourselves the best chance," said Mark Dimondstein, the president of the American Postal Workers Union, who,

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the *Times* says, will contribute to the Amazon campaign with “no strings attached.”

In contract after contract, the AFL-CIO has imposed cuts in real wages amidst soaring inflation, while smothering and betraying every effort of workers to resist the demands of corporate management. Last month, the United Steelworkers boasted that it had imposed a “responsible contract” on oil workers, which does not add to “inflationary pressures.” This is the type of contract the “union lawyers” praised by Smalls on Friday plan to negotiate at the Amazon plant.

The union executives are working closely with the Biden White House and the Democratic Party, which represent a section of the ruling class that sees in the unions a critical instrument for the suppression of the class struggle.

During a speech Wednesday at the Building Trades Union Legislative Council, President Joe Biden hailed the ALU victory, saying, “Amazon, here we come.” The leading media outlets have responded in a similar manner. The *New York Times* called the ALU victory “remarkable, and worthy of celebration.The *Washington Post*, owned by Bezos himself, praised the “small, upstart independent union led by a former employee of the Staten Island warehouse,” and hailed the ALU for “breaking many of the traditional organizing rules and relying on workers’ momentum.”

The fact that the newspaper owed by the Amazon boss is writing glowing articles about Smalls and the ALU should cause every worker to pause and think about the direction the ALU is going.

In addition to courting the corrupt officials in the AFL-CIO, Smalls is seeking to direct workers behind the Democratic Party. Asked by a CNN reporter earlier this week if he felt that the Democratic Party is still the party of working people, Smalls said, “I want to believe that.” He then urged the Democrats to “get involved and help these workers and put together some laws or pass the PRO Act to help us organize and continue moving forward.”

The section of the ruling class for which Biden speaks wants a disciplined, regulated labor force, under conditions of growing social anger over soaring inflation. Biden has proposed measures to fund, promote and integrate the unions into the structure of the government. This, the president foresees, will be the means of blocking strikes and imposing “national sacrifice” on workers to pay for the economic crisis and the enormous cost of preparing for war against Russia and China.

This is not, however, what Amazon workers want. They want to fight and win their demands, including those advanced by the ALU during its campaign.

A fight against Amazon, a corporate behemoth with immense resources, will not be won through backroom negotiations with Amazon lawyers, with the assistance of the lawyers provided by the AFL-CIO. It can be won only through class struggle.

To build up a powerful force in the warehouses to counterpose the will of the workers to the dictates of management requires constant democratic discussion, access to information and the greatest unity of the working class, regardless of race, nationality or gender. It also means reaching out to Amazon workers internationally to prepare unified action across national borders.

This requires the development of rank-and-file factory committees, composed of and directed by the workers themselves. Such committees are necessary to maintain, develop and expand the independent initiative of the workers, and to resist all efforts to subordinate workers to the bureaucratic dictates of the AFL-CIO.

There are two ways forward for workers at the Amazon plant. One way is the direction the ALU is taking, which is a turn to the AFL-CIO. This leads inevitably to the bureaucratic suppression of the initiative of rank-and-file Amazon workers and the betrayal of their demands. The other way is for workers to develop their independent organization and initiative and build a powerful industrial and political counteroffensive of the working class.

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