

At Staten Island rallies, Amazon Labor Union closes ranks with Democrats and trade union bureaucracy

Philip Guelpa, Tom Hall
27 April 2022

Last Sunday, the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) held a pair of rallies at Amazon's facilities in Staten Island, New York, with Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and various trade union officials. The purpose of the events was to build support for the ALU's union election campaign at Amazon's LDJ5 warehouse, which is located next door to JFK8, the site of its successful union election earlier this month.

ALU is a new union formed last year by former JFK8 supervisor Chris Smalls, who was fired in 2020 for organizing protests over inadequate COVID-19 protections at the warehouse.

The rallies were a further proof, following Small's trip to Washington D.C. to meet with the president of the Teamsters and other high-ranking union bureaucrats, that the ALU is moving rapidly to dissociate itself from the opposition sentiment of the workers who voted to recognize it. Instead it is integrating itself with the Democrats and the existing pro-corporate unions.

The rallies were held outside of shift changes, meaning almost no workers were able to participate. Instead, those in attendance were primarily reporters, union officials, Democratic Party staffers and members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The *New York Times*, which has provided sympathetic coverage to the ALU, noted, "The rally appeared to attract a crowd of more than 100, though many of those in attendance did not work at the facility."

Workers during a shift change an hour after the second rally told the *World Socialist Web Site* they had not even been informed about the events, which were primarily for the news cameras and corporate press, including the *Times* and Jeff Bezos-owned *Washington Post*.

Among workers, there is widespread sentiment for a real struggle against the giant online retail and logistics corporation. "Amazon should be under investigation!" one worker told the WSWS. "Or shut the company down! Amazon treats people like slaves. You can't call out. You can't choose your days. You get injured. They should let people work at a human pace, not keep at a high pace, for only \$18.45. We need more. I have been injured twice."

With regard to the ALU, she added, "I heard the union is supposed to come in. But I don't know anything about them, so I'm giving them the benefit of the doubt."

Who was at the rallies?

Those who spoke from the platforms of the rallies were a virtual who's who of left-talking charlatans and corrupt, well-heeled union bureaucrats. Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (who was earlier criticized by Smalls for not giving ALU enough support) make a specialty of using socialist-sounding rhetoric to attract support among workers and youth who are moving to the left, only to betray them to the Democratic Party as it moves further to the right.

The two made only boilerplate remarks during brief appearances in the morning rally and then left, almost without even taking questions until stopped by Smalls. ALU Vice President Derrick Palmer gushed, "Shout out to Bernie Sanders. Man, you're a legend, bro, seriously. Shout out to AOC, thank you, thank you."

Present at the second rally were members of a number of pseudo-left groups that function as appendage of the Democrats, including Socialist Alternative, the International Marxist Tendency and Workers Voice as well as some left-liberal activist groups (e.g., Make the Road). Among the speakers was Larry Holmes, the leader of the Marcyite Workers World Party, whom Chris Smalls introduced as one of his mentors.

Seattle City Councilwoman and Socialist Alternative member Kshama Sawant also made an appearance at the afternoon rally. Conscious of the deep alienation which workers feel towards the trade unions that have carried out decades of betrayals, she attributed this to the supposedly wrong ideas in the heads of union officials, not the material interests they derive from serving as tools of corporate management.

She complained about union officials embracing an ideology of "business unionism" and "the false idea that somehow you can win over the bosses with moral arguments." In fact, the unions are not simply pursuing a wrong strategy but have actively worked for decades to reduce the living standards of workers. In exchange for functioning as a labor police force for management, union officials are paid massive salaries, enjoy positions on corporate boards and control vast amounts of company shares.

Regardless of her tepid complaints, Sawant and the ALU leaders had no problem sharing a platform with the paragons of "business unionism." These included Mark Dimondstein, President of the American Postal Workers Union, who earlier this year rammed through a sellout contract which helped to lay the groundwork for the evisceration and ultimate privatization of the U.S. Post Office. Also included were officials from the Transit Workers Union, which blocked a strike by Philadelphia transit workers last fall and kept 30,000 New York transit workers on the job during the pandemic even

as at least 177 workers died of COVID-19.

An official from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters attended in place of union President Sean O'Brien, who had pulled out a few days before. O'Brien is a former acolyte and thug for the previous Teamsters President James Hoffa, Jr. and was disciplined by the union in 2014 for threatening violence against campaigners from the Teamsters for a Democratic Union opposition slate.

However, when O'Brien shifted his allegiance to run for president in last year's election, the TDU threw its weight behind O'Brien, playing a crucial role in whitewashing his past to present him as a converted labor "reformer." The Teamsters, which overrode a majority "No" vote in 2018 to enforce a contract at UPS with wages even lower than at Amazon, is hoping to use the ALU as a prop to bolster its own plans to expand its presence and its dues base into Amazon.

Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, was also present. She makes nearly \$500,000 per year and is a major political operative in the Democratic Party and the Biden administration.

Weingarten has spent the last two years traveling the country to beat back the demands of teachers to keep the schools closed during the pandemic. As schools have served as one of the primary vectors for the transmission of COVID-19, she bears a direct personal responsibility for the scale of sickness and death in the United States.

Recently she made a trip to Poland to promote Biden's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and cover for the extreme-right and neo-Nazi forces active there. She considers countering anti-war sentiments among workers as a critical "national security issue." She sees a movement of 1 million Amazon workers, which is not under the control the AFL-CIO, as just as much a threat to national security, i.e., the interests of the corporate and financial elite that rules this country.

The ALU abandons workers as it embraces the bureaucracy

The workers' vote to recognize the ALU at JFK8 was motivated by a belief that it was an alternative to the hated existing trade unions. The same week in which the results in Staten Island were announced, the more established Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) suffered a second humiliating defeat in its high-profile bid to unionize an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama.

In contrast to the RWDSU, which pointedly refused to raise workers' expectations or rattle their potential management partners by issuing any concrete demands, the ALU promised in the course of its campaign that it would fight for a wage increase to \$30 per hour, job security, paid sick leave and a free shuttle service to work. However, it made no indication of what its strategy was to fight for such demands.

In Bessemer, the RWDSU made no real attempt to establish contact with workers at Amazon, relying instead on support from the Democrats, including President Biden. Democratic officials and celebrities held regular rallies outside the Bessemer plant in which almost no workers attended, of the type which the ALU held Sunday.

The ALU is now rapidly abandoning the demands it had raised during its own campaign. In a recent interview with the DSA-aligned *Jacobin* magazine (which wrote two articles praising the Sunday rallies), Smalls explained the outcome of the JFK8 vote in entirely

subjective terms which wrote out their own demands, claiming that workers voted for them in part because they had provided them with food during shift changes.

Smalls also absurdly presented workers' experiences with the unions as universally positive. "I tell the workers in Staten Island that, once they get on the bus, they should ask the bus driver. They are in a union, and I guarantee they love their job, they love their benefits. This applies to anybody in the country," he said.

ALU's abandonment of workers' demands and its whitewashing of the established unions is the price for the financial and technical support now flooding into ALU from the AFL-CIO unions. In the latest example, Recently Weingarten promised a six-figure donation to the ALU (which would be roughly equivalent to what she makes in a single year) to help it acquire office space.

The support for the Amazon Labor Union is part of the desperate effort of the unions and the Democrats to find a mechanism to shore up their own collapsing support. Indeed, the strategy of the Biden administration, the self-declared "most pro-union administration in American history," is to use the services of the unions to corral the explosive growth of social opposition, driven by runaway inflation, the consequences of the profit-driven response to the pandemic and now the costs of war.

The disaster suffered last year by the RWDSU in the Bessemer campaign, much to the shock of the unions and Biden, who had staked the reputation of his office through a public de facto endorsement of the union, revealed that the unions are so isolated from and despised by workers that their ability to play the role of a labor police force is in serious doubt.

In the year since then, not only ALU but various other "democratic union" formations, such as Starbucks Workers United and bogus reform factions in existing unions such as Teamsters for a Democratic Union and Unite All Workers for Democracy in the United Auto Workers, have acquired increasing prominence. In almost all cases, this has been due to the rapid growth in media coverage and institutional support from the Democrats and sections of the existing union bureaucracy.

A real struggle by the working class requires a fight against these outlived organizations. Workers at JFK8 did not vote for the ALU in order to give Smalls a platform to rub elbows with well-heeled officials and establish a new generation of union bureaucrats. To safeguard their interests, Amazon workers must organize themselves to defeat this attempt to prepare a new trap for them and defend their own independent initiative.

A successful struggle requires that Amazon workers appeal not to the AFL-CIO but to their brothers and sisters in the international working class, who are also fighting against low wages and brutal working conditions. This requires the formation of a independent rank-and-file committee of Amazon workers at Staten Island, controlled by the workers themselves and not by aspiring bureaucrats.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact