

Amazon Labor Union rejected in vote at second warehouse, following its embrace of AFL-CIO and Democratic Party

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Workers at Amazon's LDJ5 sorting facility in the New York City borough of Staten Island voted to reject the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), according to vote totals released Monday afternoon. The final tally was 380 to 610, out of a workforce of approximately 1,600.

The vote is a rapid reversal of fortunes for the new union. It takes place barely a month after its successful and highly publicized unionization drive at JFK8, a much larger facility located across from LDJ5. ALU President Chris Smalls and other ALU officials attempted damage control after the vote, saying the fight at LDJ5 "was not over" and indicating they would challenge the result because Amazon had intimidated workers.

The result clearly took not only the ALU but the corporate media and the Democratic Party by surprise. After the JFK8 result, top Democrats, pseudo-left groups such as the Democratic Socialists of America and even corporate newspapers, including the Jeff Bezos-owned *Washington Post*, hailed Smalls, a former JFK8 supervisor fired in 2020 for organizing protests over the lack of COVID-19 protections, as the leader of a new upsurge of the labor movement.

The motivation behind this wall-to-wall support, however, was not innocent. The corrupt AFL-CIO bureaucracy had hoped to use the ALU as a means of shoring up its own tattered credibility. As for the Democrats, including President Biden, support for ALU flows from their strategy of using the services of the pro-capitalist and pro-war unions in a bid to corral explosive opposition in the working class into harmless, officially sanctioned channels.

The embrace of ALU came as this strategy began to encounter serious difficulties. The successful vote at JFK8 was announced alongside the disaster suffered by the more established Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), which failed in its second attempt to unionize Amazon's warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama.

The overwhelming rejection of the RWDSU in the first

vote last year, despite a nationwide mobilization by the Democratic Party and a personal endorsement by Biden himself, clearly came as a shock. It demonstrated the degree to which the unions, after decades of sellouts alongside unrestrained self-enrichment through their control of corporate stocks, bribes and misappropriation of workers' dues money, are isolated from and despised by the working class.

At the same time, the endorsement of the union by the Democrats—a capitalist party that long ago abandoned any program of social reform and functions today as a party uniting Wall Street with the military and sections of the privileged upper middle class—not only had no effect but may well have further discredited the union in the eyes of workers.

At JFK8, the ALU was able to attract a certain layer of support by presenting itself as different from the established unions. In contrast to the RWDSU's pointed refusal to raise any demands, the ALU claimed it would fight for a \$30 per hour starting wage, better working conditions and free shuttle service to work. Meanwhile, the ALU received relatively little open support from the Democratic Party. This occasionally prompted criticisms by Smalls, including of Democratic "left" politicians like Senator Bernie Sanders and Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, further burnishing his "anti-establishment" credentials.

However, immediately after the result at JFK8, the ALU moved with record speed into the arms of the Democrats and the union bureaucracy. Smalls made a trip to Washington D.C., where he met and shook hands with Teamsters President Sean O'Brien and Association of Flight Attendants President Sara Nelson. The photo of Smalls with O'Brien, a notorious gangster who was disciplined in 2014 for threatening violence against his opponents in the union, was widely circulated and criticized, prompting Smalls to defend his trip on social media.

The trade union officialdom also flooded the ALU with

promises of financial and institutional support. American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, who spearheaded an offensive against the opposition of her own members to reopen schools in the middle of the pandemic, pledged hundreds of thousands of dollars to help the ALU purchase office space. “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,” Smalls declared.

Smalls also made the rounds on cable television, giving interviews everywhere from the right-wing Tucker Carlson to Trevor Noah of the “Daily Show.” At the same time, the ALU moved rapidly to abandon those demands which it had made in the course of its campaign at JFK8, which, at any rate, they never indicated how they intended to win.

The LDJ5 campaign was far more oriented towards this growing institutional support. A pair of rallies held the Sunday before the start of balloting was attended by Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez, Weingarten and other top union officials but virtually no workers. LDJ5 workers were reportedly not even informed of the event, which at any rate took place outside of regular shift changes. The rally resembled those which the RWDSU had held in its unsuccessful unionization drive at Bessemer.

The attempt to use the ALU as a willing cover for the bureaucracy and the Democrats appears to now have backfired spectacularly. Instead, the exact opposite happened: The ALU managed to discredit itself within a few short weeks by its association with these layers. Every step towards the bureaucracy and the Democratic Party represented a step away from the workers.

The ALU and its backers appear to have vastly overestimated its support among Amazon workers which, to the extent that it still exists, remains highly conditional and tenuous. The union won the vote at JFK8 on a 55-45 margin, on a turnout of somewhat more than 50 percent. Only 2,654 workers out of an estimated workforce of 8,300, or 32 percent of eligible voters, turned out to vote for ALU. Its support among JFK8 workers is far more subdued compared to the rapturous response in *Jacobin* magazine and other pseudo-left outlets, and is conditioned on waiting to see whether the ALU’s actions will match its words during the unionization campaign.

Already, attempts are being made to attribute the outcome to a stepped-up anti-union campaign by Amazon at LDJ5, including the use of company agents on the shop floor spreading slanders about Smalls and the ALU. Similar claims were made in the aftermath of the 2021 result at Bessemer, blaming the overwhelming margin of defeat on a mailbox located on Amazon’s property used to collect ballots. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled

that this had tainted the “laboratory conditions” of the vote and ordered a re-vote. But this only resulted in a second defeat this year, by a somewhat smaller margin but with significantly lower turnout.

Assuming the claims of underhanded tactics by Amazon is true, and there is no reason to doubt them, it is a matter of fact that the unions were built in America in the 19th and early 20th centuries in the face of violent opposition from the capitalist bosses who employed industrial spies and gun thugs to arrest and murder union organizers. They were backed by the capitalist state, which issued court injunctions, carried out mass arrests and mobilized military forces to crush strikes and smash unions. But today, the ALU and the unions as a whole have the support of powerful sections of the political establishment, including the White House and the NLRB. Indeed, Amazon is challenging the result at JFK8 on the grounds that a local NLRB official interfered on ALU’s behalf.

The unions in the opening decades of the 20th century were established through semi-insurrectionary struggles of the working class against exploitation and the violence of the capitalist state. The unions of today, totally integrated with both management and the state, jointly enforce exploitation and direct all their efforts at suppressing and disrupting the class struggle. They are incapable and even fearful of making any sort of appeal for workers.

The vote is a debacle not only for the ALU itself but for this entire state-controlled labor framework. Although it has been used successfully for decades by the ruling class to prevent any challenge from below, the rejection of the ALU demonstrates the alienation of the working class from the bureaucracy and its desire to find a genuinely independent outlet. This is now at a very advanced stage.

Workers will not find this through the ALU or a similar “democratic union” formation. New types of organizations are needed, rank-and-file factory and warehouse committees, which are capable of uniting workers both inside and outside of the unions and provide them with the means to fight not only attacks from management but the betrayals of the union bureaucracy.



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