

Amazon Labor Union suspends unionizing efforts in New York as Amazon continues legal bid to overturn election at JFK8 warehouse

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The Amazon Labor Union (ALU) has suspended its campaign to organize three Amazon facilities near the JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island, New York. This is a significant about-face following the ALU's announcement that it would campaign at these three facilities shortly after its election victory at the latter facility in April.

On April 1, almost 2,700 workers voted in favor of affiliation with the ALU, making it the first union to win a victory at an Amazon facility in the United States. These votes were an expression of opposition to constant surveillance, punishing productivity goals, low pay and management's callous indifference to workers' lives during the coronavirus pandemic.

By voting for the ALU, many Amazon workers hoped to create a vehicle through which they could fight to overturn the oppressive "rate" system, for safe working conditions, and for an end to the disrespectful and degrading treatment from management. Christian Smalls, the ALU's interim president, is a former assistant manager at the JFK8 warehouse who was fired in 2020 for leading a protest against inadequate COVID-19 protections. The vote for the ALU also defied the company's efforts to intimidate workers who sought to form a union.

However, Amazon has steadfastly refused to recognize the ALU's victory. After the election, Amazon's army of lawyers quickly filed objections with the regional office of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), accusing the ALU of inappropriate tactics and the NLRB itself of bias toward the union. These accusations of "unfairness" are utter hypocrisy coming from a trillion-dollar company that used every trick in its book to tip the scales in its favor, including by holding mandatory meetings to warn workers not to unionize. Hearings have concluded, and the NLRB will issue a decision within weeks.

The union has suspended campaigns in order to

concentrate on the legal battle at JFK8, according to Connor Spence, secretary-treasurer of ALU. "We're going to prioritize JFK8. If we fail at JFK8, then all of this is for nothing." The legal challenge and, as long as it is subordinated to the official labor relations framework, the negotiation of the first contract at JFK8, however, could take years, meaning that ALU's efforts at the other Staten Island warehouses could be on the backburner indefinitely.

The *World Socialist Web Site* condemns Amazon's challenge of the vote and demands that the democratic will of Amazon workers be respected.

A real fight against Amazon requires the broadest mobilization of Amazon warehouse workers both in and outside of the ALU, as well as workers throughout the logistics industry. Any contract at JFK8 will set the tone for the industry nationwide. Workers at other facilities have a vested interest in helping the JFK8 workers secure massive gains. To win support, workers must organize around clear demands, including massive pay increases, cost of living adjustments, workers' control over safety inside the plant, limits on hours, and triple pay for overtime. Groups of workers must be sent to the other facilities to win them over in a united struggle.

But this is precisely what the ALU is not doing. Instead, ALU and its interim president Chris Smalls are oriented towards the corrupt AFL-CIO bureaucracy and the Democratic Party, who have flooded ALU with money and institutional support in the aftermath of the JFK8 vote.

ALU has received hundreds of thousands of dollars and fancy New York City office space courtesy of the Teamsters, the American Federation of Teachers and other established unions, and Smalls himself was called to the White House for a photo-op with Biden. During the same trip, Smalls met with Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA. More recently, he

shared the stage at the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) convention with AFT President Randi Weingarten. Smalls himself has been given significant coverage in the corporate press and has been elevated to virtual celebrity status, especially among pseudo-left groups in and around the Democrats such as the Democratic Socialists of America.

No doubt ALU will have justified these ties by reference to its newfound resources and credibility. But such attention amounts to little more than golden handcuffs. These forces are seeking to cultivate ALU as “rank-and-file” political cover for their own pro-corporate activities. The same unions which have pledged support for ALU have spent all of their efforts blocking strikes and enforcing contracts with substandard wage increases, below not only runaway inflation, but even non-union workers. One of ALU’s biggest backers, AFT President Randi Weingarten, was instrumental in forcing through the unpopular and deadly reopening of schools on behalf of corporate America.

As for Biden, who is attacking wages through the Federal Reserve’s hiking of interest rates, his claim to be the “most pro-union president” in American history means he is drawing together with the bureaucracy to prevent work stoppages in a bid to smother the massive growth of opposition in the working class, as it is doing on the West Coast docks and in the railroad industry.

ALU’s embrace of the Democrats and the AFL-CIO has produced not new momentum, but a rapid organizational crisis. Several weeks after the election at JFK8, ALU lost a second vote at the LDJ5 facility next door. This campaign, in contrast to the one at JFK8, relied heavily on support from the Democrats and the official unions. Bernie Sanders and top ranking union officials flocked to high-profile rallies in Staten Island before the vote, which were held during working hours, meaning rank-and-file workers could not attend. After this defeat, the ALU ended its organizing efforts at LDJ5 and stopped collecting union cards from workers at the other two New York facilities that it had planned to unionize.

The failure of the LDJ5 vote mirrored two failed campaigns by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama. Relying exclusively on institutional support from the Democratic Party, including an unprecedented de-facto endorsement by President Biden, and even some Republicans such as Senator Marco Rubio, the RWDSU refused to raise any demands which it would be pledged to fight for in the event that the vote passed, and had little to no connections with workers inside the warehouse.

On July 7, the ALU announced that it would support unionization campaigns at Amazon facilities in Albany, New York, and Campbellsville, Kentucky. Smalls pledged to give

workers at the two locations “whatever they need” and said that they would become formal chapters of the ALU. Workers at an Amazon facility in Garner, North Carolina, also were reported to be in talks with the ALU.

In practice, Matt Littrell, who is leading the unionization drive in Campbellsville, told *Bloomberg* that the union had promised only to provide signature cards, T-shirts and, perhaps in the future, volunteers.

If the NLRB sustains Amazon’s objections, it could invalidate the JFK8 election results and order a new election. But an NLRB decision in favor of the ALU likely would not end the dispute. Amazon almost certainly would appeal such a decision. The company doubtless intends to use the administrative process to prolong the union certification process as much as possible, in hopes of bogging down any hope of achieving workers’ demands in endless paper shuffling and bureaucratic red tape—a characteristic feature of “labor relations” in the United States.

The typical practice of ALU’s newfound “friends” in the union bureaucracy, when faced with such legal action by management at a newly-unionized plant, is to keep workers sidelined while the legal process plays out over the course of several years. In the meantime, they generally engage in backdoor discussions with management to work out an arrangement, typically involving massive concessions, in a bid to convince them to drop their opposition. For example, the International Association of Machinists worked out such a sweetheart deal with Boeing to allow it into its plant in North Charleston, South Carolina in 2007. When workers discovered this double-cross, they sought to punish the union by voting to decertify in 2009.

Amazon workers cannot allow their struggle to be smothered through such bureaucratic horse trading. Instead, they need to mobilize their own strength by organizing a rank-and-file committee, independent of the entire corporatist “labor relations” framework, and proceeding from what workers urgently need, and not what Amazon is willing to part with.



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