“Everyone is underpaid”: Workers at Amazon’s ONT8 warehouse, site of stalled unionizing effort by Amazon Labor Union, speak out on working conditions

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Recently, Amazon’s ONT8 fulfillment center in Moreno Valley, California, located in the Inland Empire area, has received national attention because of a unionization drive there by the fledgling Amazon Labor Union (ALU). However, ALU was compelled to withdraw its petition to hold a unionization vote at the facility, although it reportedly intends to resubmit.

This was the latest setback for the ALU, which, after winning the first-ever union election at a US Amazon facility at the JFK8 warehouse at the start of the year, has largely stalled in its subsequent unionizing efforts. The withdrawal of its petition at ONT8 followed by only three days the rejection of the ALU by a wide margin in a union election in the ALB1 warehouse in Albany, New York.

This was all the more remarkable given the fact that a fire had broken out at the warehouse only a few days before the vote. This was the third fire to have broken out at an Amazon warehouse in New York State recently, including one at JFK8, where dozens of workers and several ALU reps were suspended for demanding that workers be sent home. The ALU hardly raised the issue of the JFK8 fire in its Albany campaign, however.

The fortunes of ALU’s organizing efforts have stalled at precisely the point that the ALU has ingratiated itself with the Democrats and the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. The ALU was able to secure victory at JFK8, even as a far better-financed and publicized campaign by the Retail, Warehouse and Department Store Union at an Alabama facility floundered. They did this by convincing workers that ALU was a more democratic, rank-and-file alternative to the established trade unions, dominated by unaccountable bureaucracies joined at the hip with management.

But as money from New York City real estate and support from President Biden and other leading Democrats pour in, support and enthusiasm for ALU among workers is beginning to dry up, even as Amazon workers around the country and the world are rising up against low pay and working conditions.

The setback for ALU at ONT8 does not reflect satisfaction by Amazon workers with their working conditions. On the contrary, a reporting team from the *World Socialist WebSite* which visited the warehouse last week encountered widespread opposition.

An Amazon truck driver spoke on the issue of pay, stating that truck drivers for Amazon get paid $17 an hour, compared to the standard $32 an hour for truck drivers in other industries.

“Everyone is underpaid,” the employee stated. “People inside the warehouse are underpaid. So is every department. Human Resources, they’re underpaid. And they only got a $1-an-hour raise too. You have about six departments, and they’re all underpaid. All of them.”

According to a June 2019 report on Freight Waves, Amazon truck drivers at the time received pay at 18.4 percent less than rates posted for DAT Solutions, a freight exchange service provider. A similar report showed that Amazon Air freight pilots, who are members of the Teamsters, make 33 percent less than their counterparts who fly for FedEx or UPS.

Another worker with five years pointed to the low

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pay for higher-seniority workers, “Everybody got a $1 raise. They gave $1 to the new hires, who start at $18. With their shift differential, it puts them at $19.50 an hour. And I’m making $20.40. That’s not right, after being here five years.”

“The work is the same. I don’t agree with a lot of Amazon’s ways, so that’s why I’m not promoted. And I’m at that age that I can’t. I’m not going to go back to school.”

Another worker commented on the recently installed accommodations such as fans, water coolers and shaded rest areas at the facility. “I’ve noticed that the company started to, just recently, how do I say, keep everyone as happy as they can. They’re trying to appease a lot of people right now.” Referring to the recent walkouts by Amazon employees at the San Bernardino Air Hub during a heat wave, the worker said, “I think they’re worried about workers walking out like how they did in San Bernardino.”

A significant number of workers at ALU are students or youth who see their jobs at Amazon as only a temporary stopping point. Some workers say this played a role in their reluctance to support the ALU campaign. “I just see this as a part-time thing; I only work here two days a week. I clock in, do what my job wants me to do, then go home,” one worker stated.

One worker, who splits his time with classes at Cal State University Long Beach, said, “My girlfriend is in the teaching credential program. She’s doing student teaching. That’s four months without pay. It’s so horrible. They make it so hard on teachers.”

But another significant factor was the experience which workers have had with other unions. One woman described her experience with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) while she worked for the government of Riverside County. “They [the SEIU] are despicable. They’re just there to steal your dues and do nothing for you.” She explained that the ALU does not have a plan and that they have not even negotiated a contract for JFK8, months after they unionized.

Other workers stated that they like their job, but feel as though workers deserve better and because of that felt obliged to sign the ALU’s petition to hold a unionization vote. “That’s why I signed my name up,” one worker said. “I’m okay with my pay, but I feel as though every worker here deserves better.”

One worker, when discussing the ALU petition, stated, “Workers are not going to go back to the 1930s. Workers are not going to sit around and stay quiet. Bosses cannot do what they got away with back in the day and workers aren’t going to let that happen either.”

The worker agreed that, with or without the ALU or a union, workers will have to rise up to demand something better. “I work 11- to 12-hour shifts sometimes, and with these demanding schedules, you know, I guess these companies’ profits are more important than one’s private life. Scheduling time off is difficult since I’m always being called in at the last second.”

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