One year since Amazon Labor Union's victory at Staten Island

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April 1st marked one year since the successful unionization campaign by Amazon Labor Union (ALU) at the JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island, New York. The workers at the facility, which employs more than 8,000 people, were the first Amazon workers in the US to vote to join a union. This is an event which clearly contains significant lessons for the whole working class.

JFK8 workers voted for ALU because they were determined to fight the world's second largest corporation, notorious for dangerous working conditions that are enforced through electronic monitoring. Later last year, JFK8 workers showed their determination again when they stopped operations at the warehouse when management tried to make them work through a fire.

Workers were attracted to the newly-founded ALU because it presented itself as an independent, democratic alternative to the existing bureaucratically controlled trade unions. Indeed, even as JFK8 workers voted for ALU, the Retail, Warehouse and Department Store Union (RWDSU) endured its second debacle in a row in its bid to unionize an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama.

The RWDSU refused to even raise any concrete demands in its campaign. It had no connections with workers in the plant, relying instead on support from the Democratic Party and various celebrities. The RWDSU made clear that it saw unionization at Amazon as only an opportunity to expand its dues base and develop the sort of corrupt ties with management that it and other unions have long established at other workplaces.

JFK8 workers saw ALU as representing something different. But almost immediately after its election victory, the ALU began integrating itself into the apparatus of the AFL-CIO. It received hundreds of thousands of dollars and even Manhattan real estate from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the American Federation of Teachers and other unions who hoped to use ALU to bolster their own credibility, under conditions where they have spent decades enforcing one sellout after the other.

"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," ALU President Chris Smalls said at the time.

Smalls became a media sensation and toured the country speaking and meeting with Democratic Party officials, including a visit to the White House to meet President Joe Biden. "You've done it in one place, let's not stop," Biden told Smalls while embracing him. ALU was also embraced by Democratic Party "lefts," including the Democratic Socialists of America and Bernie Sanders.

All of these supposed "friends of labor" in the Democratic Party came together with Republicans last year to ban a strike by 120,000 railroaders. Biden repeatedly calls himself the most "pro-labor" president in US history. What he really means is that he is using the union bureaucracy to block strikes and limit wage growth. No small factor behind this strategy is the disciplining of the working class at home as American imperialism escalates the war against Russia and plans for war against China. Smalls has become part of a continuous stream of union officials eagerly making pilgrimages to the White House.

Every step in the direction of the Democratic Party and the bureaucracy removed the newly-minted ALU officials more and more from Amazon workers. Today, workers at JFK8 report to the WSWS that they hardly ever even see ALU representatives on the shop floor. ALU, meanwhile, experienced a series of high-profile organizing debacles at a string of other warehouses, including at LDJ8, located next door to JFK8, only one month later. In October, ALU was rejected by a margin of 2 to 1 at Amazon's ALB1 warehouse in Albany, New York, and it was forced to suspend unionization drives elsewhere.

One year later, little has changed at JFK8. Workers still do not have a contract, and Amazon has made it clear that it has no intention of even negotiating one any time soon. Instead, the company spent more than $14.2 million on anti-union "consultants" last year.

Worldwide, Amazon has embarked on a jobs bloodbath, cutting more than 27,000 positions since the start of the year. While these are focused on white collar workers, the company is also rapidly moving to consolidate its warehouse operations. Amazon has canceled, closed or delayed 99 US facilities, according to industry consultant Marc Wulfraat. This only shows that the need for a struggle by Amazon workers is even more urgent now than last April.

Meanwhile, ALU, formerly the poster child for "democratic unionism," is controlled by a small group of unelected officials, including Smalls himself, who are increasingly at each other's throats over access to money and control of the organization. "In interviews, a dozen people who have been closely involved with the Amazon Labor Union said the union had made little progress bringing Amazon to the bargaining table, to say nothing of

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securing a contract. Many cited lopsided losses at two other warehouses, unstable funding and an internal feud that has made it difficult for the union to alter a strategy that they considered flawed," the *New York Times* reported in March.

Most of the ALU staffers interviewed by the *Times* placed blame for the crisis mainly on Smalls for his profligate travel expenses and authoritarian attempts to control the organization. But Smalls himself is essentially being used as a scapegoat. All of the factions involved accepted without question the ALU's integration with the union apparatus and the Democratic Party.

The ALU claimed that it was building a new rank and file-led, militant union. But its orientation was not to building an international movement of the working class against capitalism but to building a new union apparatus.

ALU's attitude towards union and workplace "democracy" is essentially the same as a constellation of groups in more established unions that have spent decades campaigning for the union apparatus to be "reformed" from within. According to their argument, the origin of bureaucratism and corruption in the unions is bad individual leaders, which could be fixed by replacing them with "good" ones, as well as with certain minor amendments to union constitutions and procedures.

All of these groups, including Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) in the Teamsters and Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) in the United Auto Workers, are explicitly opposed to a rank-and-file rebellion to smash the influence of the apparatus. In last year's UAW elections, UAWD attacked the program of Will Lehman, a socialist autoworker running for president on a platform of abolishing the bureaucracy, as supposedly "divisive."

The experience at ALU is now being repeated with UAWD and TDU, which now occupy top posts within the bureaucracies of their respective unions. They are playing critical roles in the attempt to engineer sellouts at UPS and in the auto industry, where thousands of jobs are on the chopping block. These organizations, far from pushing the unions to the left, are being carried forward within the bureaucracy towards the right.

The victory of ALU was a test case for this perspective of union "reform" under virtually ideal conditions. No bureaucracy even existed from the outset within ALU, and the organization initially enjoyed no broader institutional support. And yet, beginning within a matter of days after the election, a bureaucracy nevertheless rapidly began to emerge semi-spontaneously within ALU.

The evolution of the ALU was predicted even in advance of the vote by the *World Socialist Web Site*. As we wrote in March 2022:

> ... the ALU provides no strategy or perspective for how this will be achieved. In fact, Smalls and the ALU have no strategy at all. Despite their veneer of independence, the ALU has close ties with the RWDSU and the officialdom in the existing unions as a whole, who have deliberately promoted them as a "democratic" prop to shore up the legitimacy of the unions at Amazon.
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> If workers vote to bring them in, they will quickly find that the ALU, like countless earlier experiments with "democratic unionism," is no different than its bigger brothers in the AFL-CIO. It will quickly seek to come to an arrangement with Amazon management which secures its role as joint enforcer of concessions and brutal working conditions.
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> Regardless of how the vote plays out, the central question which workers confront is how and on what basis they can establish their own power and initiative and fight for their own demands. The way forward is not through the reform of the outmoded pro-corporate unions, but the development of a new movement based on internationalism and the independence of the working class from the corporate parties and their trade union lackeys.

Amazon workers at JFK8 and elsewhere still face the need for better wages and working conditions. But in doing so, they must also deal with this new apparatus which has sprung up. Workers need organization, but they need organizations which they control and which are not subordinated to the bureaucracy or to the Democratic Party.

The way forward for Amazon workers is to join in the growing movement for rank-and-file committees, composed of and led by workers themselves. This will provide the organizational framework in which they can unite with their coworkers at Amazon warehouses around the world. It will also provide the means for them to link up with workers in the auto industry, on the railroads and other workplaces, where workers are also forming rank-and-file committees in opposition to the union bureaucracy.

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