Amazon JFK8 workers at a crossroads: Which way forward?

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The movement of workers at Amazon's JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island, New York, is at a crossroads. More than a year after workers voted to unionize with the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), none of their demands for improved working conditions have been met, and a contract is no closer to being negotiated. The ALU increasingly resembles the discredited unions it sought to distinguish itself from, while workers at JFK8 say that the union has forgotten about them.

Today, the ALU is holding its first "mass membership meeting"—though JFK8 workers in touch with the *World Socialist Web Site* report not being notified about it—in the form of a rally. The union leadership's goals are not to listen to workers' concerns and develop a fighting strategy, but to prop up its deteriorating authority and mitigate the acute crisis in which it finds itself. But to fight Amazon effectively, workers need an entirely new orientation and strategy from the one the ALU has been offering.

The rally will commemorate the union's victory and "embark on a journey of empowerment," according to the ALU. But instead of inviting rank-and-file workers to speak and enabling the widest possible discussion on the way forward, the ALU will "empower" workers by making them listen to the speeches of officials from the pro-war, pro-corporate Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy. The former banned a national railroad strike last year, while the latter collaborated in and accepted this massive betrayal of the working class.

Speakers include Democrat Nina Turner, a former national co-chair of the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign and former Ohio state senator; Democrat Jessica Ramos, a New York state senator; and Stacy Davis Gates, president of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and vice president of the Illinois Federation of Teachers.

By supporting both of Sanders's presidential campaigns, Turner has helped to corral left-wing opposition back into the Democratic Party. Ramos has been endorsed by establishment politicians like US Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and the *New York Times*—the leading mouthpiece for the Democratic Party. Gates played a leading role in forcing educators and students back into unsafe schools in Chicago during surges of the pandemic in both 2021 and 2022, amid widespread opposition.

This line-up is wholly in line with the ALU's orientation toward the leaders of the AFL–CIO bureaucracy and the Democratic Party following its victory at JFK8. Far from being the independent and worker-led organization it originally promised to be during its initial campaign, the ALU has openly solidarized itself with these enemies of the working class while carrying out attacks on the democratic rights of its rank-and-file members.

Last year, ALU President Chris Smalls rammed through changes to the union constitution behind workers' backs to delay union leadership elections indefinitely after the original constitution called for elections following a successful National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) vote. In a leaked audio recording reported by the *New York Times*, Smalls declared at a meeting of ALU organizers, "If you can't abide by this structure, that's the door."

This resulted in a lawsuit filing last month by a newly established "ALU Democratic Reform Caucus" made up of a rival faction of the leadership. In it, the filing states:

> What Defendant Smalls and his paid, hand-picked 'Executive Board' is engaged in is no less than the hijacking of a rather unique institution, the ALU, which has been able to raise almost a million dollars in the past year because of the notoriety created by its win at an Amazon Warehouse. They refuse to hold membership meetings, they have unilaterally 'amended' the Constitution to keep themselves in power indefinitely, they have threatened their opponents, most of whom made up the core group which won the Amazon election in the first place, and, most importantly, they refuse all efforts to have a fair, democratic, election.

While the reformists criticize Smalls, they offer no alternative strategy to workers on the way forward against Amazon except through "transparency," "professionalism" and a "strong union presence"—according to their "program" outlined on their website. This fight is over access to resources, not rank-and-file control.

JFK8 is a critical battleground in an emerging working class

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offensive. Amazon workers cannot wait and rely on the ALU leadership, the Democratic Party or the NLRB, because help will not come from these quarters. Instead, and in sharp contrast to the strategy of these rival cliques, the 8,000 workers at JFK8 must take matters into their own hands.

An independent, democratic and militant fighting organization must be built at JFK8 by forming a rank-and-file committee, to transfer power from the developing apparatus of the ALU to Amazon workers themselves.

Amazon is one of the most powerful companies in the world, but like all corporations relies entirely on the exploitation of the workers. There are some 1.5 million Amazon workers worldwide, but unleashing the power of these workers requires the development of an inter-connected network of organizations of, by and for the rank-and-file.

A rank-and-file committee should raise and discuss their demands and their strategy to fight for these demands—including coordinated work actions—as widely as possible. At the same time, turning out to and linking up with other Amazon and logistics workers and the broader working class in New York, around the US and across the globe is critical. Amazon workers are battling a transnational corporation, and this likewise requires the broadest unification and coordination between workers.

Based on discussions with JFK8 workers, the *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV) proposes as a starting point of discussion the following demands:

1. Hourly starting wage of $30/hour with full cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) to combat inflation!

2. The rate system must be thrown out! Workers must be in control of the speed of production. Abolish time off task (TOT), surveillance and harassment. No TOT for bathroom breaks.

3. No layoffs! Stop the jobs bloodbath! Workers must have job protection! Workers must unite in defense of all jobs and living standards. Part-time workers interested in working full-time must be converted to full-time status. The system of unpaid time off (UPT) must be thrown out, and no workers can be fired for accumulating UPT. Workers must be able to call out of work and stay home if they are sick, with 10 paid sick days per year.

4. Any workplace injuries are unacceptable! Amazon has the highest injury rate in the logistics industry, and a rank-and-file committee of workers must oversee and ensure safety conditions. If any injury takes place, it should be thoroughly investigated, the managers responsible should face accountability and consequences, and the worker should be fully compensated by Amazon (medical expenses plus paid sick leave).

Safe and immediate evacuation in the event of fire. No return to work until safety tests are performed and the rank-and-file safety committee approves it. Workers need up-to-date information on COVID outbreaks at JFK8. High-quality masks and air purification must be provided. No retaliation against any workers who raise safety issues.

5. Workers must receive medical benefits that are paid for in full by Amazon!

6. More buses and travel options between all five boroughs and JFK8 must be available at Amazon's expense!

Struggles involving hundreds of thousands of workers throughout the logistics industry have exploded in the past year, and these workers are the natural allies of JFK8 workers. UPS workers are in a fight against both UPS and the Teamsters leadership and are currently voting on a rotten Teamsters-backed tentative agreement that falls far short of their demands. 30,000 workers at freight company Yellow have just been laid off after the Teamsters allowed the company to file for bankruptcy. Dockworkers in Canada just had a sellout contract imposed upon them by the government in collaboration from their unions.

At UPS, workers have formed the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee and have stated that whatever the outcome of the contract vote, they must take the power from the union bureaucrats and restore it to the shop floor. This perspective applies equally to workers at JFK8 and all other Amazon facilities. The UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee will hold an online meeting at 7 pm EDT on Sunday, August 20, which JFK8 workers are encouraged to attend and learn from.

Building truly independent and representative organizations of class struggle at Amazon means, above all, building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which seeks to unify the struggles of workers around the world. The *International Amazon Workers Voice* and the *World Socialist Web Site* stand ready to offer any assistance necessary to help Amazon workers organize and develop this fight. Please contact us today if you are interested in forming a rank-and-file committee at JFK8 or elsewhere.

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