The Amazon Labor Union's first "mass membership meeting": A tiny rally of Democrats and union officials

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This past Saturday, August 19, the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) at Amazon's JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island, New York, held what was supposed to be the union's first "mass membership meeting." It was nothing of the sort.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote before the event, "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."

The "meeting" took place down the block from the bus stop across from JFK8 in the form of a rally with a line-up of Democratic politicians and union presidents speaking. It began several hours after it was supposed to and was attended by only around 30 to 40 ALU organizers and supporters, joined by trade union officials from the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The AFT donated $250,000 to the ALU in 2022, according to public Department of Labor records.

The meager crowd gathered to hear ALU President Chris Smalls; Democratic New York State Senator Jessica Ramos; Democratic New York State Senator Jessica Scarcella-Spanton, who chairs the Veterans, Homeland Security and Military Affairs Committee; Stacy Davis Gates, president of the Chicago Teachers Union and vice president of the Illinois Federation of Teachers; Democratic politician Nina Turner and SAG-AFTRA actor Joseph Sikora.

No rank-and-file workers spoke, and workers coming off of their shift at the same time paid no attention to the event, except to grab a plate of food being offered.

The ALU event was not live-streamed for workers, and following it, a recording of the meeting was never posted online nor minutes or any summary shared with the ALU membership. The ALU merely tweeted, "We would like to give a special shoutout to everyone who attended our mass membership meeting yesterday including our incredible speakers." To hold such an event in the name of a "mass membership meeting" without attempting to even invite workers waiting for the bus a mere 100 feet away shows that this event was a sham.

In Smalls' remarks, he praised his executive board for being primarily made up of women of color. However, he did not mention that the board is unelected or that the ALU currently is facing a lawsuit over its delay of its leadership elections.

Smalls said that the ALU will continue to work with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to get a contract, which the union still does not have well over a year after it won union recognition at the facility. He also stressed the need for raising funds, especially voluntary worker dues. In the only new post the ALU made on social media on Saturday, it asked workers for dues money: "We can not sustain the fight for a fair contract without voluntary Member Dues! … Stop by the Dues table today!"

During her speech, Jessica Ramos praised the Warehouse Worker Protection Act, which she sponsored and was recently signed into law by New York Governor Kathy Hochul. However, the bill does nothing to stop companies from establishing brutal work quotas or prevent them from firing workers if they fail to meet those quotas, as long as they are previously disclosed.

In the brief clips of the other speakers posted on the ALU's social media, the event continued, heaping

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much praise on both the ALU and the established trade unions.

When the event was first announced more than a month ago via livestream, Smalls and ALU Vice-President Michelle Valentin-Nieves said: “This is going to be very special. Because it’s not only going to be our first one—we’re doing it kind of different. We’re actually going to do it at the location, at the warehouse … we know that we got to meet workers where they’re at, and where they’re at is at work, especially when you’re working at Amazon 40, 50, 60 hours a week. We want to catch the majority of our members.”

JFK8 has over 8,000 warehouse workers unionized by the ALU, but the union did nothing to build for the event. Organizers did not even try to get workers who were waiting at the bus stop right next to the rally to attend while it was taking place.

The only ones interacting with rank-and-file workers at the bus stop were members of a team from the *World Socialist Web Site* and *International Amazon Workers Voice*. The team distributed copies of the statement: “Amazon JFK8 workers at a crossroads: Which way forward?”

The campaigners also raised the broader situation in the logistics industry, including the UPS contract struggle. The following Tuesday, the Teamsters union declared the national contract for 340,000 UPSers ratified, drawing skepticism and anger from workers.

The team spoke to workers about their working conditions, their demands and the need for workers to organize themselves to fight against the rapidly coalescing bureaucracy emerging in ALU. A different path of struggle was put forward from the one down the block, oriented to the broader working class instead of the Democratic Party and AFL-CIO bureaucracy.

Out of the dozens of workers WSWS reporters spoke to at the bus stop, only one said they thought they had even seen something about the ALU event but could not remember what it was. None knew it was supposed to be a mass membership meeting for workers.

A worker who had been at JFK8 for several years had only scorn for the ALU—“It’s a joke,” she said. The union only hands out “free doodads” but isn’t waging a fight. Another worker said that nothing had changed since the ALU had been elected and they had no confidence in it. One worker asked the WSWS campaigners what was going on with the ALU and their contract since, explaining they had not heard anything this year. This was the typical sentiment of workers with whom the WSWS spoke.

Workers also discussed their conditions and demands. One worker said that she had been working at Amazon for four years. “I hate it,” she said, adding that it is unbearably hot inside the warehouse in the summer. “They’ve put up fans, but they don’t make it any more comfortable.” She also said that it was very difficult for pregnant workers to take maternity leave. She did not have confidence in the ALU because conditions had not changed. Her friend had just been fired by Amazon, which is still a common occurrence since the ALU was voted in.

Another worker expressed his disdain for Amazon’s TOT (Time Off Task) surveillance system, which penalizes workers for even taking bathroom breaks. “It’s ridiculous,” he said. He agreed that workers need to discuss their demands themselves and build power on the shop floor, rather than have Democrats and union officials give speeches to workers.

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