

Amazon Labor Union leadership election marked by abysmal turnout

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In an election marked by an abysmal 5 percent turnout, a reform slate became the new leadership of the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), which is based at Amazon's JFK8 fulfillment center in Staten Island, New York. Only 247 of the facility's 5,312 workers cast ballots, which reflects JFK8 workers' lack of faith in the ALU. Since it won a unionization election at JFK8 more than two years ago, on the basis that it was a more "democratic," "rank-and-file"- led alternative to the established bureaucratically-controlled unions, the ALU has not achieved any meaningful improvements for workers.

It is notable that the turnout in the ALU leadership election was even lower than the 9 percent turnout in the United Auto Workers (UAW) leadership election of 2022. The latter contest, which was marked by systematic voter suppression on the part of the UAW bureaucracy, had the lowest turnout of any national union election in US history. The ALU election held at the end of July represents a new nadir.

Unlike previous ALU elections, this vote was held by mail. Some workers reported that they did not receive their ballots in time, and others described the voting instructions as confusing. In addition, the vendor handling the election was changed at the last minute. These reports recall the voter-suppression tactics also used in the UAW election.

The winning slate included candidates from the ALU Democratic Reform Caucus. Former Amazon worker Connor Spence, who led the slate, was sworn in as the union's president on Wednesday. The slate's candidates won all 15 of the union's top leadership positions, including vice president, secretary-treasurer and recording secretary.

Spence formed the ALU Democratic Reform Caucus amid a factional struggle within the ALU leadership.

The reform caucus criticized the leadership of ALU founder Chris Smalls, whom it accused of authoritarian methods and a lack of transparency. The caucus sued the other ALU leaders last year and demanded a leadership election. The recent election, which was overseen by a court-approved monitor, resulted from a settlement reached between the two factions.

The ALU-Ma'at slate, which was named after an Egyptian goddess, included other current and former ALU officials. This slate, which Smalls endorsed, was defeated, as was the Workers First slate led by Michelle Valentin Nieves, another ALU organizer.

None of the three factions of the ALU leadership offered a way forward for workers at JFK8. Workers' mass abstention from the election reflects their understanding of this fact.

A major reason for the ALU's victory in the 2022 representation election was its leadership's insistence that the ALU was distinct from and independent of the established trade unions, which have discredited themselves through decades of sellouts. But almost immediately after the ALU's election victory, Smalls began meeting with major union bureaucrats. He first met Sean O'Brien, president of the Teamsters, which is notorious for its ties not only to organized crime, but also to the US government. The Teamsters and other unions began providing the ALU leadership with money and other resources, along with advice about how to "do business" with Amazon.

The embrace of the union bureaucracy, as well as the Democratic Party, rapidly drew the ALU away from the workers who had voted for it. When a representation election was held at LDJ5, an Amazon warehouse across the street from JFK8, workers voted against joining the ALU by a margin of about two-thirds. Other attempts to organize Amazon facilities in New York

and elsewhere also failed. As the difficulties mounted, the ALU leaders deepened these corrupt ties, especially as their difficulties increased and their finances were depleted, and away from JFK8 workers.

The culmination of this embrace of the labor bureaucracy was the ALU leadership's decision to seek affiliation with the Teamsters. Although the Smalls faction and the reform faction negotiated with O'Brien and his minions separately, the entire ALU leadership endorsed affiliation. In an election held in June, most JFK8 workers voted in favor of affiliation with the Teamsters, but turnout was only 16 percent. The result was the creation of ALU – International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 1, an autonomous local within the Teamsters.

The Teamsters bureaucracy has a long history of betraying its members' interests, overriding their democratically expressed will and enforcing the demands of the companies. Last year, after much bombast about preparations for a strike at UPS, O'Brien oversaw the ratification of a national contract that is enabling the company to lay off more than 12,000 employees and close or automate hundreds of facilities. Top Teamsters officials have yet to acknowledge publicly that the layoffs are taking place. Carol Tomé, CEO of UPS, bragged that the contract was "really good" for shareholders.

In July, O'Brien spoke at the Republican National Convention, which was a degraded fascist spectacle. The Teamsters president expressed his admiration for former president Donald Trump, who attempted to overturn the results of the 2020 election and remain in power as a dictator.

"It needs to be easier for companies to remain in America," O'Brien said, signaling his readiness to slash workers' wages and benefits to make American businesses "competitive" with those in developing countries. Overflowing with nationalism—and even including rhetoric copied from Hitler, when he denounced global elites for their lack of loyalty to the US—O'Brien's speech reflected the willingness of a section of the trade union bureaucracy to throw in its lot with fascism.

Spence has promised to hold joint strategy sessions with the Teamsters and "bring Amazon to the table." But any contract negotiated under the aegis of O'Brien will betray the JFK8 workers and maintain Amazon's

regime of exploitation, as workers at UPS can attest.

The only way for JFK8 workers to secure better wages, improved benefits and a safer workplace is for them to wage the fight themselves. They can take the initiative by forming a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the ALU and of both pro-corporate political parties.

Through democratic structures workers control, they can identify their needs and develop a strategy to win them. To fight the retail behemoth, JFK8 workers will need to reach out to workers at LDJ5 and other facilities, as well as workers at UPS and throughout the logistics industry.



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