

Chicago police arrest Starbucks workers at sit-in during shareholder meeting

Brian Green
17 March 2025

Last week, 11 Starbucks workers and supporters were arrested by Chicago police during a sit-in at one of the city's earliest unionized Starbucks locations. The protest took place during Starbucks' annual shareholder meeting.

The protest was part of a broader campaign across multiple cities to pressure Starbucks into signing a contract with Starbucks Workers United (SWU), the union representing more than 10,500 employees across over 550 stores nationwide. Workers at locations across the country have been voting for the past three years in favor of union representation.

At the Chicago location, workers and supporters packed the café before moving outside to protest with signs. A dozen protesters, including current and former Starbucks employees and community allies, staged a sit-in under the banner "Fair Contract Now." Their peaceful demonstration was met with a police response, as officers arrested the protesters, sparking outrage on social media.

"It's super messed up that they are targeting people just trying to stand up for their rights," one user wrote. "Workers deserve better!" Another commented, "At the end of the day, these companies are making it clear that they only care about their money—nothing more, nothing less."

While this protest highlights the genuine sentiment of workers fighting for better conditions, it also exposes the limitations of protest tactics that focus on pressuring executives rather than confronting the profit system.

However, actions staged outside corporate offices or shareholder gatherings are primarily aimed at pressuring executives to negotiate with the union bureaucracy. Such tactics divert workers' opposition into symbolic gestures which resolve nothing.

Workers' real power lies not in pressuring corporate executives but in mobilizing collective industrial action—strikes, work stoppages, and other direct disruptions to production and profit.

Starbucks' refusal to bargain with workers who have voted to unionize exemplifies the company's ruthless stance. Accused of committing over 400 labor violations, including illegal firings, store closures and intimidation tactics, Starbucks continues to disregard its workers' democratic rights.

Protests alone will not change this. What is needed is a coordinated campaign of strikes and workplace actions that unites not just unionized Starbucks locations but the entire workforce—both unionized and nonunionized. This movement must also extend beyond Starbucks, reaching out to workers across the low-wage retail and service industries, building solidarity and collective power. Crucially, this effort must be led by rank-and-file workers, not the union bureaucracy, which has a history of suppressing worker militancy to maintain its relationships with employers.

SWU is affiliated with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which for decades has negotiated low-wage contracts around the country in sectors like healthcare and janitorial services that leave workers with subpar wages, poor benefits and inadequate working conditions. These agreements often involve no-strike pledges and minimal improvements, entrenching the bureaucracy's power without addressing the real needs of workers.

The bureaucracy's strategy is to keep workers on the job for years without a contract, eventually reaching an agreement with management that offers little real improvement. In exchange for this and potential "neutrality agreements" by the company in future unionization efforts, the unions bargain away the right

to strike and other key measures. These tactics help to establish the kind of corrupt relationship that bureaucracy has with other employers, where the bureaucracy's priority is securing deals that maintain its own influence rather than fighting for workers' rights.

This was shown in the fate of the Amazon Labor Union (ALU). Despite its initial success at the JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island, the ALU was unable to organize workers at other Amazon facilities or maintain strong ties with its rank-and-file members. Instead, the union sought alliances with the Teamsters and the Democratic Party, which sidelined the workers' struggle in favor of symbolic protests and political deals.

As a result, JFK8 workers still do not have a contract three years later, and their fight has been largely ignored by the union leadership. Starbucks workers must avoid making the same mistake by being drawn into a dead-end strategy of symbolic protests that fail to challenge the real power structures at play.

Pseudo-left groups like Labor Notes and the DSA have held up SWU, as they had earlier done with ALU, as shining examples of grassroots worker organizing. In reality, the SWU's reliance on the union bureaucracy and its focus on symbolic actions undermines the actual power of workers. The fight for true rank-and-file control will require workers to build independent, democratic organizations that empower them to take control of their struggles. Real rank-and-file control can only be achieved through a direct confrontation with the bureaucracy.

The fight at Starbucks is part of a broader, global class struggle in which workers are increasingly demanding the wealth they create. This struggle, which intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, spans industries from logistics to healthcare, to auto and education.

Workers are recognizing the intersection between their fight for better wages and benefits and the deepening political crisis. With the second Trump administration increasing attacks on workers' rights and democracy, it is clear that workers must confront not only corporate power but also the political forces that defend it.

For the baristas who risked arrest, these tactics—while noble—will lead nowhere unless they are part of a

broader, more radical struggle. This struggle must challenge not only corporations but the entire capitalist system, which is incompatible with the basic interests of the vast majority of the population. Workers must be prepared to enforce their democratic rights and challenge the bureaucracy that seeks to limit their power and control over their own struggles.

To overcome these challenges, workers must build rank-and-file committees—independent, democratic organizations that allow workers to take control of their own struggles, free from the limitations of the union bureaucracy. These committees must be formed directly by workers on the ground, ensuring that decisions are made collectively by those most affected. They can then coordinate actions across stores and industries, mobilizing broader support and building the solidarity necessary to challenge the capitalist system and win real gains for workers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact