

Four years of the Amazon Labor Union: A balance sheet

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On April 1, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that Amazon must negotiate with the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), which has 5,000 members at the JFK8 fulfillment center in Staten Island, New York. According to the ruling, by refusing to negotiate or even recognize the ALU, Amazon “has engaged in unfair labor practices.”

The Teamsters, with which the ALU has been affiliated since 2024, called the NLRB decision a “historic victory.” In fact, it is anything but. The enforcement of the decision is in question, and it has not changed the hazardous conditions and low pay for which Amazon is notorious.

The NLRB ruling came four years to the day since warehouse workers voted to join the ALU, becoming the first Amazon workers in the US to unionize. Workers took a stand in order to fight one of the world’s largest corporations, which in the eyes of millions is a poster child for high-tech sweatshops and, through founder and centi-billionaire Jeff Bezos, massive inequality. It came out of a genuine upsurge in what has proven before and since to be one of the most rebellious workforces at any Amazon facility.

But in spite of this, JFK8 workers are no closer to winning their demands four years later, and still do not have an initial contract. What could and should have been a starting point for a broader nationwide upsurge of Amazon workers was followed by a series of major defeats in other facilities, including LDJ5 located across the street from JFK8.

The fourth anniversary of ALU provides an opportunity to draw a balance sheet of the experience. The central strategic question that emerges is this: the development of a genuine struggle of the working class requires a fight for the independence of workers from the Democratic Party, the labor bureaucracy and the capitalist state.

The origins of Amazon Labor Union

ALU was founded by Chris Smalls, a former assistant manager at JFK8, in 2021. Smalls had been fired by Amazon after he organized walkouts at the warehouse in March of 2020 to protest the unsafe conditions during the opening weeks of the coronavirus pandemic.

The actions that Smalls and other workers organized were part of a broader, worldwide spontaneous rebellion which forced temporary shutdowns that spring and summer. The same month, autoworkers, acting in defiance of attempts by union officials to keep them on the jobs, carried out wildcat strikes which spread from Italy and Spain to Canada and the United States. Other walkouts, organized from below and often without official union approval, also took place in meatpacking plants, shipyards and other industries that year.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International insisted that these rebellions had to take organized form if they were to advance the interests of the working class. Workers

had to seize the initiative out of the hands of the labor bureaucracy. The sacrifice of workers’ lives to profit had to be answered with a movement of the working class as a whole, directed against the corporate oligarchy. Workers had to insist on the right to stop production if conditions were unsafe, to control safety protocols and to establish workers’ control over production itself.

The widespread refusal of the union bureaucracy to organize strikes to force the shutdown of unsafe industry was a particularly obscene expression of its integration, over decades, into corporate management. One contract after another had been used to sign off on the destruction of millions of jobs, enforce speedup and concessions, and block or isolate strikes.

An organic movement of the working class threatened to disrupt the bureaucracy’s relations with management, the Democratic Party and the six-figure salaries financed by workers’ dues money. For that reason, these forces opposed every independent initiative from below.

Vote at JFK8

For years, the established unions had tried to gain a foothold at Amazon without success. The year before the ALU victory, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) suffered a debacle at Amazon’s Bessemer, Alabama facility.

This was not because Amazon workers were complacent or lacked a fighting spirit. Rather, after decades of betrayals the established unions were unable to generate real support because their aim was not to organize a genuine struggle, but to increase their dues base and establish labor-management relations with Amazon as they had with other employers.

The ALU won support because it presented itself as something different. It turned heads because it was identified with rebellion from below, especially given the role of Smalls in the 2020 walkouts. It presented itself as an “independent, democratic” alternative to the existing bureaucratically controlled unions, over which workers exercise little to no influence.

The ALU victory came as a shock to the political establishment, which had largely ignored the campaign. The result was a sign of the deep-going alienation and hatred felt by workers toward all official institutions. Workers believed the ALU could be an instrument of their own control over conditions on the shop floor.

But real independence means more than a lack of formal affiliation from

the Democrats or the established trade union bureaucracy. It means a new strategy, a new political framework based on the struggle for workers' power and the mobilization of the working class on the basis of its own distinct and independent interests.

Such a struggle collides at every point with private property, with the domination of society through the two corporate-controlled parties, and with the nationalist framework imposed by the unions. It requires the unification of workers across industries and national borders in a common organization and a common program. This is not a distant perspective, but the essential strategic question of the present day. Fascism, war and inequality can be fought only through the independent industrial and political struggle of the working class.

The ALU, in spite of its origins and its initial formal independence, did not have such a program. The struggle remained on the terrain of trade-unionism in the broad political sense: seeking recognition, bargaining rights and institutional legitimacy within the existing order, rather than developing the independent struggle of workers against that order.

To be sure, the ALU proposed to do this in a more rank-and-file and "democratic" way than the existing unions. But rank-and-file and democratic organization are impossible when separated from the struggle for workers' power. Whatever the intentions of its leaders, a grouping that avoids the issue of political independence inevitably ends up serving the established capitalist order. This was confirmed with remarkable speed.

Following the election victory, a flood of union officials and Democratic Party politicians descended on Staten Island. They congratulated the ALU leadership and offered office space, financial resources, publicity and access to the corridors of power.

These forces did not intervene to strengthen an independent workers' movement, but to capture it for their own purposes. The bureaucracy and the Democrats sought to use the ALU to cover over their own relations with management and their hostility to any genuine rebellion from below.

The ALU leadership adapted pragmatically to this pressure. From within the framework it had accepted, the support seemed rational. Why should it reject money, staff, lawyers and political access in order to build a more durable organization?

But the ALU could not simultaneously integrate itself into the orbit of the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party while developing an independent movement of Amazon workers against the entire corporate and political structure those forces defend. These were mutually exclusive paths.

From that point on, there was a dramatic change in the union's fortunes. Election campaigns increasingly relied on newfound political and financial allies, Democratic Party officials and support from the White House rather than the independent mobilization of workers themselves.

This rapidly alienated workers. The ALU suffered a decisive election loss at the adjacent LDJ5 sorting center just one month later in May 2022. The union subsequently lost another election at the ALB1 warehouse in Schodack, New York, and twice withdrew petitions for an election at the ONT8 fulfillment center in Moreno Valley, California.

This was a disaster for workers at JFK8. Amazon saw no reason to give in and dug in its heels, refusing to bargain. Instead of expanding the struggle outward—mobilizing Amazon workers nationally and internationally around wages, speedup, surveillance, injuries and inequality—the focus

shifted toward legal appeals to the NLRB and the courts.

Following these setbacks, financial support from the trade unions began to dry up, and the union went into debt in 2023. Factional disputes emerged into the open. Facing increasing financial difficulties, the ALU leadership looked to the Teamsters to bail it out. In June 2024, JFK8 workers voted to affiliate with the Teamsters.

The Teamsters had already blocked a strike by 340,000 UPS workers and were helping management carry out one of the deepest rounds of job cuts in the company's history. But they gained a "rank-and-file" cover through the ALU affiliation. The Teamsters limited strike of Amazon workers in the area in 2024 deliberately excluded JFK8 workers.

The trade union bureaucracy long ago became an instrument of management not because of corruption alone, but because it defends a nationalist and pro-capitalist program fundamentally incompatible with workers' interests in the present epoch. Bureaucracy is not an accident, but the necessary product of an organization that rejects the independent political mobilization of the working class. The ALU's joining of the Teamsters was the logical outcome of this contradiction.

Conclusion

Workers need organizations based on a fundamentally different principle: not bargaining for a place within the existing order, but the independent democratic control of struggle by workers themselves.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees is leading this struggle. The IWA-RFC is fighting to establish rank-and-file committees in every factory, warehouse and workplace, and unite Amazon and other workers in the US with their class brothers and sisters internationally.

These committees, made up of the most class-conscious and militant workers, will counter-pose the will of shopfloor workers to the will of corporate management and its enforcers in the trade union bureaucracy. They will organize collective action to fight management abuse, unsafe working conditions and speed up and job cuts.

Rank-and-file committees will establish lines of communication between workers in every department and facility and across Amazon and other logistics companies throughout the United States and internationally. They will educate workers on the rich history of the class struggle in the US and internationally, and the decisive role of socialist consciousness for the liberation of the working class from capitalist exploitation.

Most decisively, rank-and-file committees, organized under the leadership of the IWA-RFC will connect the fight against Amazon to the fight against war, dictatorship and the capitalist oligarchy as a whole.



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