

At the close of voting in Bessemer

The class issues behind the unionization drive at Amazon

International Amazon Workers Voice
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Voting wraps up this weekend for nearly 6,000 Amazon workers in Bessemer, Alabama over whether to join the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). The results will likely be released next week.

It must be stated clearly: The campaign to bring the RWDSU in at Amazon arises not from a rank-and-file rebellion of the working class, but from strategic calculations of the ruling class.

The campaign has received unprecedented, favorable attention from the corporate media and from the national political establishment. President Biden intervened directly at the beginning of the month with a video that all but endorsed a “yes” vote, a first for a sitting president. A train of Democratic Congresspeople, including Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, have traveled to Bessemer to support the campaign. Even Republican Senator Marco Rubio, the notorious right-wing anticommunist, has thrown in his support, along with favorable reports from right-wing media such as the *Wall Street Journal* and Fox News.

All of them claim, in one form or another, that the RWDSU will provide Amazon workers with leverage against one of the most powerful and ruthless corporations on the planet.

No doubt, these Amazon workers are looking for a way to fight the company. Conditions at Amazon are intolerable. Workers are subjected to 10 hour shifts with only 30-minute breaks, forced to “make rate” by sophisticated electronic tracking equipment. These conditions drive workers to injury, when they are often then thrown out of the warehouse and denied workers comp.

But when a capitalist politician claims to support the “rights” of workers, workers should check their wallets. Behind their claims of support for Amazon workers, ulterior motives are at work, in accordance with a definite class strategy.

What is the situation which the capitalist ruling class faces today? Above all, it is the threat of uncontrollable social opposition by the working class.

For the past year, both parties have pursued policies that have led to the deaths of 550,000 people in the United States, and over 2.7 million worldwide, from the coronavirus pandemic,

keeping millions of workers on the job to continue pumping out profit for major corporations. Combined with the trillions of dollars in bailouts for Wall Street, the super-rich are doing better now than ever. US billionaires alone have made more than \$1.3 trillion dollars over the past year, with Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos leading the pack.

They know perfectly well that there will be hell to pay for this reckless and criminal subordination of human lives to profit. Once struggles begin to break out among workers anywhere in the country, they reason, they can rapidly spread into a nationwide and even international struggle of the working class.

Moreover, the capitalists are preparing for war all over the world, including with nuclear-armed Russia and China. The Biden administration is doubling US military spending in the Pacific and ringing mainland China with long-range missiles.

Under these conditions, the ruling class needs a mechanism for disciplining the working class and channeling its anger. They have such mechanisms in the trade unions. This is why Democrats and sections of the Republicans are aggressively intervening in the unionization campaign in Bessemer. The unions are key instruments of class rule, defenders not of workers, but of the capitalist system. They work, not to organize workers against management, but to organize management against the workers.

Generations ago, the unions, while subordinating workers to the Democrats and cracking down on left-wing and socialist workers, still conducted strikes and oversaw a general rise in the standard of living. But the time when this pro-capitalist double-bookkeeping could continue has long since passed, and the unions have been converted into strikebreaking organizations, on the direct payroll of the companies. Since the early 1980s, the unions have imposed one sellout after another, slashing wages, closing workplaces and enforcing unsafe working conditions.

Two years ago, the unions themselves laid out their role explicitly in arguments before the US Supreme Court. “Union security is the tradeoff for no strikes,” a lawyer for the public employees’ union said in *Janus v AFSCME*. Without safeguarding the financial interests of the union bureaucracy, he

said, “you can raise an untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country.” He made these arguments as teachers in West Virginia were rebelling against the union’s attempt to shut down their strike with a sellout contract, a stand that triggered a wave of teacher strikes throughout the country.

Over the past 12 months, the unions have thrown their weight behind preventing an “untold specter of labor unrest” during the coronavirus pandemic. The United Auto Workers, staggered by a wildcat strike in March that shut down production in US auto plants, forced autoworkers back to work in May. The UAW has worked with management to conceal the spread of infections and deaths in the industry. The United Food and Commercial Workers, the parent union of the RWDSU, has worked to keep meatpacking plants open, even as more than 285 meatpacking workers have died. The RWDSU itself has played the same role in meatpacking plants throughout the South.

This year, the Biden administration has relied on Randi Weingarten and the American Federation of Teachers to break the opposition of educators and reopen school districts throughout the country. In Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Oakland and other major districts around the country, the unions have enforced reopening agreements, in some cases without even the pretense of a vote by the membership.

The unionization campaign in Bessemer is a top-down operation, an intervention led by the Democrats and the union bureaucracy, not a rank-and-file upswell. Moreover, the union’s president, Stuart Appelbaum, is a longstanding conduit between the union bureaucracy and the Pentagon, who has traveled the world in the interests of the US war machine.

The RWDSU has not even raised any demands in relation to wages or working conditions in the plant. In an attempt to cover this up, and to bolster its apparently flagging appeal among younger black workers, it has brought in Black Lives Matter and associated groups to drape the campaign in racial colors, presenting it as a continuation of the Civil Rights movement.

The reality is that the unions, far from fighting for the principle of equality of all races and nationalities, work to inject poisonous nationalism and divide workers from different countries, as well as immigrants and native-born, against each other. This “America First” nationalism, which the unions embraced long before the election of Donald Trump, serves only to break the unity of the working class, forcing workers to accept cuts in the name of “their” capitalists’ supposed right to earn a profit.

In the United States, Amazon has bitterly opposed attempts to unionize its warehouses. But in Europe, its facilities are mostly unionized, and the unions have worked hand-in-glove with the company there to enforce conditions that are little better than in the United States, while keeping them on the job during the pandemic or calling, at most, token strikes to allow workers to blow off steam.

If workers vote to certify the RWDSU in Bessemer, it will

work to ensnare the initiative of workers in a web of federal labor laws that are designed to prevent workers from conducting a struggle. If the company attempts to challenge the outcome of the vote, the RWDSU will leave the issue up to the courts, while demanding that workers remain on the job. And it will aim to sanction, without any meaningful change, the same conditions that exist now at Amazon, only lending them the imprimatur of having been agreed to by the workers’ legally-sanctioned “representative.”

Workers need organization. They cannot face a giant corporation like Amazon alone, without coordinating their struggles with the rest of the company’s global 1.3 million-person workforce, and with workers in other industries. But this cannot be accomplished by bringing in an organization that is hostile to their most basic interests.

Whatever the outcome of the vote, a new orientation is needed. Where the unions promote corporatism and class collaboration, workers need an anti-capitalist perspective. Where the unions promote national chauvinism, working class internationalism is needed. Where the union proceeds from what management is willing to part with, workers must proceed from what they urgently require.

The organizational embodiment of this perspective is the rank-and-file committee. With the assistance of the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party, workers are building a rapidly growing network of such committees among teachers, autoworkers, health care workers and Amazon workers.

These committees have played the leading role in mobilizing opposition to the betrayals of the unions. In Detroit, when the UAW forced workers back into the plants last year, safety committees were formed to expose unsafe conditions and pierce the management-union cover-up of infections. In school districts throughout the country, rank-and-file safety committees are leading the opposition to the reopening of schools, which has been sanctioned by the teachers’ unions.

The fight to establish and build rank-and-file committees must be developed and expanded. This must be combined with a new political strategy to mobilize the working class in the US and internationally in the fight for socialist policies, including the expropriation of pandemic profiteers like Amazon owner Jeff Bezos and the transformation of Amazon and other logistics companies into public utilities, democratically controlled and collectively owned by the working class.

Join this fight today! Contact the WSWs *International Amazon Workers Voice* for more information.



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