

National Labor Relations Board calls for union revote at Alabama Amazon facility

Nick Barrickman
3 August 2021

A National Labor Relations Board hearing officer has determined that Amazon substantially interfered in the carrying out of a unionization drive at its BHM1 fulfillment center in Bessemer, Alabama, earlier this year. According to statements released by both Amazon and the plaintiff Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, the federal labor board has recommended a revote.

Last spring, the RWDSU's campaign to be recognized as the bargaining representative for over 5,800 Amazon warehouse workers suffered a massive defeat. Despite heavy press coverage and public support from national Democratic and Republican Party officials, including President Joseph Biden, only 738 Amazon workers voted in favor of the RWDSU, or roughly 13 percent of the total workforce.

The RWDSU appealed the vote, alleging that Amazon used manipulative tactics to interfere in the election process. Its chief complaint was that Amazon ordered a mailbox be installed on the company's property to collect votes. According to the RWDSU, this act gave the impression that the company would be involved in counting ballots.

According to NLRB official Kerstin Meyers, Amazon's "conduct in causing this generic mail receptacle to be installed usurped the National Labor Relations Board's... exclusive role in administering Union elections." The official stated, "notwithstanding the union's substantial margin of defeat, the employer's unilateral decision to create, for all intents and purposes, an onsite collection box for NLRB ballots destroyed the laboratory conditions and justifies a second election."

Amazon also held captive audience meetings and subjected workers to anti-union propaganda, potentially further slanting the outcome in the company's favor, the NLRB officer said.

While Amazon management campaigned against the RWDSU, the union was completely incapable of gaining

any substantial support from workers despite widespread discontent with wages and conditions. The campaign to unionize the Bessemer plant was a top-down operation involving big business politicians, celebrities and union bureaucrats. The RWDSU officials did not advance any demands on corporate management to improve workers' conditions. On top of this, the long record of betrayals by the RWDSU in the poultry plants in Alabama and Georgia, and by the United Steelworkers, the United Mine Workers and other unions in the economically depressed Birmingham area has left workers completely alienated from the corporatist trade unions.

Predictably, RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum hailed the NLRB determination. "Throughout the NLRB hearing, we heard compelling evidence how Amazon tried to illegally interfere with and intimidate workers as they sought to exercise their right to form a union," declared Appelbaum, who signaled his intentions to retry the campaign.

The decision now rests with an adjudicator in the NLRB's regional office in Atlanta, Georgia, who should present the ruling in weeks. If the judge rules in favor of the RWDSU a new election may then proceed.

Contrary to the RWDSU's claims that it was the victim of a corporate onslaught, the organization in fact had bipartisan support from some of the United States' most powerful establishment figures and corporate entities. The RWDSU conducted a months-long promotional campaign that was publicly supported by Biden and Republican Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, among many others. In early March, the Democratic president recorded a video in which he declared the vote in Alabama "vitaly important." Biden declared that "[t]he National Labor Relations Act [of 1935] didn't just say unions are allowed to exist. It said we should *encourage* unions."

Workers in Bessemer rejected the RWDSU even though there is widespread opposition to the notoriously

exploitative corporate giant. Workers at the warehouse spoke out to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the difficult conditions at the warehouse, with workers passing out on the property due to exhaustion.

The workers in Bessemer were justifiably suspicious of the RWDSU, which refused to name a single condition that it planned to improve. Even after a worker collapsed at the BHM1 facility and later died, the RWDSU issued no statements or demands, even after being contacted by WSWS reporters about the death.

The decision of Biden's NLRB to intervene on behalf of the RWDSU and push for a revote has nothing to do with defending the democratic rights of Amazon workers. Instead, the American president is seeking to elevate the pro-corporate RWDSU and other unions to contain rising class tensions in the United States and prevent an explosion of working-class opposition to social inequality, austerity and the sacrifice of human life to corporate profit. These conditions, which have all been accelerated by the global pandemic, are producing a growing wave of strikes and other struggles which threaten to escape the clutches of the trade union bureaucracy.

In April, the White House announced the formation of a task force to assist the trade unions. According to a statement by a White House labor adviser, the goal of the committee is to "have more skilled, more experienced workers" while avoiding "labor strife."

While Biden has publicly complained that Amazon trampled over the rights of workers—in order to help promote the unions—the Democrats' real attitude to the dictatorial powers of the corporations was shown last week during his public appearance at a Mack-Volvo assembly plant in Macungie, Pennsylvania. Biden posed for photo-ops alongside the company's corporate executives and United Auto Workers trade union officials, who conspired to overturn the democratic decision of Volvo workers in Dublin, Virginia, to reject three UAW-backed concessions contracts. Biden has not issued a word of criticism towards the Swedish multinational company, which unilaterally imposed its "last, best and final" offer after workers voted to reject it, brought in strikebreakers to replace them and threatened to destroy the jobs of striking workers. Rather than oppose this blatant strikebreaking the UAW ordered workers to vote again on the same contract they rejected and then claimed it had passed by 17 votes.

In the event that the RWDSU were to win a revote in Bessemer, Amazon workers would find themselves in a battle on two fronts—against the corporation and the

union—just like the Volvo workers in Virginia. That is why Volvo workers formed their own, independent rank-and-file committee to link up with workers at Mack Trucks, in the auto plants in Detroit and other cities and with Volvo workers in Belgium and other countries. Whether the RWDSU comes into the Bessemer warehouse or not, Amazon workers will have to build rank-and-file committees just like the Volvo workers, Amazon workers in Baltimore and increasing numbers of workers across the US and internationally.

A worker at Amazon's BWI2 facility in Baltimore and part of the Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Committee expressed contempt for the RWDSU's efforts to rerun an election. He said the RWDSU was using a "deceptive tactic" to "control workers" at the company. The worker referenced an episode during the Volvo strike in which Amazon executives flew down to the NRV facility, which produces its delivery trucks, in order to bring the struggle to an end.

"They tried to intervene and influence contract negotiations," the worker said. Even so, "Volvo workers voted against all three versions of the contract" they were presented. Despite this, "the UAW, with support of Volvo executives, eventually forced them to accept a fraudulent and unreasonable contract."

A recent statement by the Baltimore Amazon Workers Rank-and-File Committee declares: What happens at Volvo affects what can happen at Amazon warehouses... The working class must respond with equal and opposite force against efforts to confine its struggles to one workplace. The bosses want to contain these struggles locally? Then we must break them out into the world sphere."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact