

America, Amazon and Unionization

For nearly the entirety of the past year, amid a deadly pandemic, warehouse workers and organizers with the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU) have rallied to attempt a historical feat: To create the first official Amazon union in the United States, which would represent around 5,800 workers at the Amazon fulfillment center in Bessemer, Alabama. With the support of the RWDSU, these warehouse employees, 75–80% of whom are Black, have pushed back against the unsafe and unfair working conditions that have become synonymous with Amazon's business.

This is the largest union drive in the history of Amazon but has ended with the company on top. After a months-long battle, 738 workers at Amazon's Bessemer, Alabama, warehouse voted to unionize, and 1,798 voted no. Ballots from another 505 workers were challenged, mostly by Amazon. The RWDSU says Amazon illegally interfered in the vote, and it plans to file unfair labor practice charges with the National Labor Relations Board. Amazon, which is led by the world's richest man, Jeff Bezos, spent millions to defeat the closely watched election. It's important that people don't misread the results of this election, People were not saying that they were satisfied with Amazon's working conditions in any way. They were saying that they were afraid to vote for the union.

In a country where labor law has been systematically designed to favor the bosses and to make it exceedingly difficult for workers to unionize, the mere fact that Amazon workers in Bessemer have made it to this point is remarkable.

Regardless of the outcome, the people behind the Amazon union drive have made significant advances in the ideological and rhetorical battle against a long-standing anti-union culture that, until recently, seemed stubbornly unshakeable.

Fifty years ago more than a third of the entire American workforce is unionised. Today, most workers are on their own. Only 6.4% of America's private-sector workers are unionized, providing little collective pressure on Amazon, Walmart, or other major employers to treat their workers any better.

Fifty years ago, the labor movement had enough political clout to ensure labor laws were enforced and that the government pushed giant firms like GM to sustain the middle class. Today, organized labor's political clout is minuscule by comparison.

The biggest political players are the giant corporations like Amazon. They've used that political muscle to back "right-to-work" laws, whittle down federal labor protections, and keep the National Labor Relations Board understaffed and overburdened, allowing them to get away with egregious union-busting tactics.

They've also impelled government to lower their taxes; extorted states to provide them tax breaks as a condition for locating facilities there; bullied cities where they're head quartered; and wangled trade treaties allowing them to outsource so many jobs that blue-collar workers in America have little choice but to take low-paying, high-stress warehouse and delivery gigs.

They've neutered antitrust laws, which in an earlier era would have had companies like Amazon in their crosshairs.

While the corporates nullified workers unions, they fully strengthened the corporate lobby to the point that they intervene at every small move of unions. The National Retail Federation has called the PRO Act [right to organize] "The worst bill in Congress". The US Chamber of Commerce, rewarded with campaign contributions, the Senators who voted to kill the \$15 minimum wage with "Abraham Lincoln Leadership for America Award" and "Jefferson-Hamilton Award for Bipartisanship."

This decades-long power shift – the ascent of corporate leviathans and the demise of labor unions – has resulted in a massive upward redistribution of income and wealth. The richest 0.1% of Americans now have almost as much wealth as the bottom 90% put together.

The power shift can be reversed – but only with stronger labor laws resulting in more unions, tougher trade deals, and a renewed commitment to antitrust. And across the country, labor activism has surged – from the Amazon union effort, to frontline workers walking out and striking to demand better pay, benefits, and safety protections.

The oppression is intensifying and so are the struggles. A situation similar to that of 120 years ago, the excesses of the Gilded Age is precipitating. At that time Capitalism saved itself with **Reform** but now workers must strive for **Revolution!**