Union Organizing Drive at Amazon Fails—Why? What Next?

written by Dan La Botz | April 12, 2021

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In a major setback for the U.S. labor movement, last week the union organizing drive at the giant Amazon facility in Bessemer, Alabama defeated. Workers voted 1,798 against and 738 for the union in a union representation election in which only about half of the 5,876 eligible workers participated.

Officials of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union argued that Amazon had intimidated the workers, though long-time union activists also pointed to other problems with the campaign, particularly the failure to build a strong workplace organization before calling for an election.

In the United States workers can win recognition for a labor union from the employer in two ways: an election conducted by the National Labor Relations Board or a strike of the workers, though recognition strikes have become quite rare since the 1970s. If 30 percent of workers in a workplace sign cards or a petition saying they want a union, the NLRB will conduct an election. If a majority of workers vote for the union, it will be recognized by the U.S. government and the company must then bargain with the union on wages and conditions.

The biggest problem in the Bessemer case, of course, was the enormous power of Amazon and the sophistication of its anti-union campaign. Driven largely by the COVID pandemic, Amazon's 2020 net sales were up 38 percent, to $386.1 billion and Jeff Bezos, the company's founder and chairman, has a fortune valued at $190 billion. With unlimited resources, Amazon held regular meetings with workers in the plant and sent text messages daily. The company pointed out that it was already paying workers an average of $16 an hour, twice the U.S. minimum wage and higher than other employers in the region. In a campaign called "Do It Without Dues," the company pointed out that workers would actually lose money with a union, paying about $500 per year in dues. Amazon succeeded in creating a pro-company team spirit among some workers, convincing them to wear "Vote No" buttons on the job.

The RWDSU began its campaign during the height of the COVID pandemic and made a particular appeal to Black workers who make up an estimated 85 percent of the workforce. There was hope that the Black Lives Matter movement had created a new enthusiasm for workers' power. The Democratic Party supported the campaign, with President Joseph Biden demanding that the company not intimidate the workers and Bernie Sanders going to the plant to speak at a rally. Yet neither BLM nor the Democrats seem to have little impact on the outcome.

The Bessemer facility only opened a year ago, part of a vast expansion of the Amazon company which hired 400,000 workers nationwide and now employees over a million. This meant that the workers in the warehouse did not know each other very well, especially given the high turnover rate, and did not have long-established relationship of mutual support and trust. When the union filed for the election in November 2020, it had not built up a strong shopfloor organization among the workers capable to taking action on its own. Nor did it do so later. As late as February the union had not contacted some workers. The RWDSU did much of its organizing at the plant gates, but made no house calls, claiming that it could not do so because of the COVID pandemic. Few workers attended union rallies.

What will happen now? In all likelihood, the RWDSU will file unfair labor practice complaints with the National Labor Relations Board, rightly claiming intimidation, and could win another election. Other unions and NGOs continue to support Amazon workers in other plants throughout the country. Some socialists have gotten jobs at Amazon to help organize on the shop floor. Despite the defeat, organizing efforts will continue. Union organizers have learned again that workers have to organize the union themselves, by building a strong movement that can take action on shop floor.