

Why the Alabama Amazon struggle matters to workers everywhere

by C.J. Atkins | PeoplesWorld.org | February 2020

Sometimes a fight at one particular workplace can be so important that workers and their allies everywhere need to take notice. The struggle going on right now at the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, is one of them.

Until March 29, nearly 6,000 Amazon employees there are voting on whether to unionize with the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU).

If they win, their victory could signal the beginning of a breakthrough to organize the corporate giants that dominate the digital economy and reverse racist, anti-union laws. It's a potential game-changer.

No U.S. Amazon facility has a union, and the company is doing everything it can to make sure Bessemer isn't the first.

Harassing texts blow up employees' phones. Wall-to-wall propaganda posters badmouth the union. Traffic light timing outside the warehouse was shortened, leaving canvassers fewer seconds to talk to employees. The union is blasted as a greedy outsider eager to get workers' paychecks.

Workers can't even escape when they're sitting on the toilet; company flyers urging a "no" vote are plastered in every stall. Amazon even pulled a Trump move when it tried (but failed) to block workers from voting by mail, saying they had to show up in person.

The warehouse in Bessemer is a new one, but workers there have gotten the full Amazon experience. The ridiculously low \$2-an-hour hazard pay they'd been getting at the beginning of the pandemic was stripped away by June—even as CEO Jeff Bezos added \$75 billion to his wealth during the crisis, making him the world's richest man.



Social distancing is all but impossible in the warehouses, and the company admits 20,000 employees contracted COVID-19 last year, although the real number is certainly higher. No one knows for sure how many have died.

When employees at a warehouse in Staten Island walked out in March to protest unsafe working conditions, management retaliated by firing Christian Smalls, the worker who blew the whistle.

In Shakopee, Minn., Farhiyo Warsame was terminated in October for complaining about the lack of PPE and forced speedups.

The problems go far beyond hazard pay and workplace safety, though. Part-time workers at Amazon's Whole Foods had their health insurance stripped away just before the pandemic hit. Last summer, when Black Lives Matter protests rocked the country, Whole Foods workers wearing buttons supporting the movement were fired—even as Amazon, like other corporations, put on a public show of backing BLM.

In February this year, the company was hit with a \$62 million-dollar ruling by the Federal Trade Commission for stealing tips from Amazon Flex delivery drivers. It was nothing but a case of flat-out wage theft.

Winning a union at Bessemer will bring immediate benefits to the workers there. They will finally have a voice when it comes to work quotas and speedups. With a union contract, a worker safety committee could negotiate the standards and protocols.

The company could no longer fire people "at will" for complaining about problems on the job. Workers would have a grievance procedure to fight back against retaliatory terminations and restrictions.

With a collective bargaining procedure in place, workers would be able to negotiate together for their wages and benefits—and hopefully make a dent in some of the massive inequality generated by Amazon.

But the importance of a victory at Bessemer goes beyond just this one warehouse. If employees here can win, it could have an impact for hundreds of thousands, even millions of other workers.

This company is one of the largest players in the new digital economy, having its hands in everything from online retail to grocery stores to logistics and delivery to cloud services and web

hosting. It is also one of the most anti-union companies around. A breakthrough at the Bessemer warehouse would potentially open the gates to organizing hundreds of other workplaces – checking the power of Bezos and the billionaire class.

This is not just a labor struggle alone, however. The battle in Bessemer is also a civil rights fight. Nearly 85% of the people who work at this warehouse are Black—in a right-to-work state in the heart of the old Confederacy.

If the workers here can do it, workers at other Amazon facilities—and at Walmart stores, restaurants, on Uber apps, and in all manner of jobs—will be inspired to stand up. Workers in other so-called "right to work" states would see they, too, can beat racial division, organize together, and win.

That's why the struggle of the Amazon workers in Bessemer deserves as much support as we can give it. Attend a solidarity rally near you. Spread articles on social media. Share information from Bamazonunion.org and MakeAmazonPay.com.

Bessemer could be the link that moves the whole chain, sparking a qualitative shift for the entire labor movement. We all have a stake in the struggles of these workers, and they need our solidarity.

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