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Amazon stole the vote! Continue the struggle: Bust racism, not unions

written by Sharon Black
April 16, 2021



Workers at an Amazon distribution hub in Gage Park, Ill., a Chicago suburb, went on strike April 7 demanding higher wages and changes to brutally long overnight shifts.

The workers' movement owes a tremendous debt to the courage of the majority-Black workers in Bessemer, Ala., who stood up to global supply-chain giant Amazon.

What they have accomplished may not be fully measurable at this point. But what's certain is that their audacity and courage pushed workers' issues at the sweatshop warehouses run by billionaire Jeff Bezos to center stage, along with workers' right to a union.

Did Amazon rig the vote?

Let's not mince words. There was nothing democratic or impartial in the vote. Why?

Every worker can tell you that their boss holds tyrannical power over their lives inside the workplace (and in a larger sense, outside too).

With the exception of discrimination, which in most instances is next to impossible to prove, they can fire you at a whim! They decide who is laid off, who is promoted and who is stuck with the worst jobs.

This gives every capitalist boss incredible advantages.

The only curb on this dictatorial boss power is union representation. And even that depends on the strength of the union — and most importantly, how organized and united the workers are.

In National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections for union representation, companies like Amazon can hold “captive meetings.”

What are “captive meetings”? The bosses can force workers into lengthy meetings while they are on the clock. These can only be described as indoctrination sessions.

Union representatives are not allowed to be present to refute their lies and half-truths.

Can you imagine the impact, fear and confusion this sews in the minds of workers who depend on their weekly wages to keep themselves and their families afloat?

More often than not, bosses spread rumors, make false promises and tell lies. They tell workers they'll get medical coverage or a raise, or that there will not be layoffs, only to renege on their promises as soon as the workers vote against the union.

Sometimes, bosses engage in even more nefarious tactics.

Amazon corrupts the process

As mail-in voting for union representation began, a mailbox suddenly appeared in front of the Amazon warehouse, inside a tent. Workers were alarmed. They described it as an unmarked unit with individually-locked compartments and a mail slot similar to those in some apartment buildings.

The voting box did not have formal U.S. Postal Service markings. Workers were pushed to bring their ballots to work so that they could vote under the watchful eyes of management.

Documents obtained from a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request show that Amazon, the biggest business client of the USPS, pushed for the box to be installed. Many details are redacted, but one passage alludes to “keys to the box.”

A dozen or so ballots trickled in daily. But on Feb. 12, 251 votes suddenly came in. Again on February 17, 350 votes came in. Almost all were “no” votes. It looked suspiciously like a ballot drop.

A More Perfect Union media group describes much of this and outlines the



possibility of outright ballot rigging.

Is labor organizing illegal in U.S.?

You might say without exaggeration that getting a union in the U.S. is as close to illegal as you could possibly imagine. The 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, dubbed the “slave

labor bill,” remains in place with few changes.

It’s not the sole reason why the unionized section of the working class has shrunk. But it explains why, under present conditions, traditional unionizing efforts have been rocky at best, and why global sweatshops like Amazon and Walmart have been able to avoid unions.

It should be noted that Taft-Hartley was passed following World War II. The war had been used to dampen workers’ struggles, but when it ended the pent-up anger and resistance resulted in massive strike waves.

U.S. imperialism emerged from that war triumphant. The world was redivided amongst the imperialist powers, with Wall Street the top dog.

With the post-war strengthening of the U.S. capitalist economy, the drive towards eroding workers’ rights that had been won in the 1930s increased. This laid the basis for what was called the McCarthy period or Red Scare, which consisted of the brutal suppression of the socialist and communist movement that had led the industrial union organizing drives and working-class victories in the 1930s.

It’s important to note that Southern Dixiecrats (Democrats who championed Jim Crow racism) played a major role in passing Taft-Hartley.

The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) labor federation had announced its intention to organize the South. The belief was that if unions succeeded there, it would set the stage for ending Jim Crow. In 1947, Black people in the South were still effectively denied the right to vote.

The struggle for Black voting rights continues today.

Fight for Black and Brown liberation

The struggle in Bessemer is taking place in the cradle of the civil-rights movement. It is led by Black workers, many of them women.

The Bessemer Amazon workers' struggle cannot be separated from the political struggle for Black and Brown freedom — including the recent Black Lives Matter uprising, and the fight, albeit in the electoral arena, to unseat Trump, who is roundly credited as a leader of the white supremacist movement.

It is in nearby Georgia that reactionaries were finally unseated by Black representatives, and at the same time, a counter-offensive by racist forces to smash voting rights has unfolded.

The impact of the massive uprising to demand an end to racist violence and police terror has resounded inside the workers' movement. Before George Floyd's murder, the cases of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia and Breanna Taylor in Kentucky swept the country.

It's worth noting that a recent strike at [7 Up in Michigan](#) was largely fought around the issue of eliminating a two-tier wage system that divided Black and white workers, with the most oppressed on the bottom rung. It was consciously recognized by the union as a fight against racism.

Clearly, fighting racism and white supremacy is a workers' issue.

Bessemer struggle continues

This is not the time to rest!

The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), which seeks to represent the Bessemer Amazon workers, has filed unfair labor practice charges against Amazon and is insisting on a new election.

Clearly, the battle will be uphill. It could take months, and reprisals and layoffs are a continuing threat. But whether they win, lose or draw, the battle continues!

There will be time to critique the tactics of the mainstream union movement, but right now it is most important to continue our support for the workers.

Stand with the workers to demand: Bust racism, not unions! Demand no retaliation!

- Join the upcoming “Workers School” called by the Southern Workers Assembly. Its aim is to build a rank-and-file-led Southern workers’ movement. It begins April 18. [You can register here](#).
- The Support Amazon Workers network is calling on President Joe Biden to use his executive powers to pass the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act. It’s important that the Biden administration feels the heat.
- The network is also calling for the issue of the Amazon workers to be front and center on May Day — International Workers’ Day. [Build May Day!](#)

It’s not just the struggle at Amazon — the movement for workers’ rights is heating up everywhere.

Over 1,000 coal miners in Alabama continue their strike. Teamsters at Marathon Petroleum in Minnesota continue to resist a lockout. And in Los Angeles, the Harriet Tubman Center for Social Justice, United Workers Assembly, Southern Christian Leadership Conference LA, and United Food and Commercial Workers have formed [an alliance to fight Kroger’s](#) planned closing of groceries in the heart of Black and Brown communities to thwart hero pay for essential workers.

Sharon Black is a former Amazon worker who wrote the series “An Amazon Worker Tells All” for Struggle-La Lucha, now [collected in pamphlet form](#). Black spearheaded a campaign to unionize food servers, was a General Motors assembly worker, and later worked for over a decade in a Baltimore food-processing plant. Black also

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