

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

written by Struggle - La Lucha  
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 served as an elected UFCW shop steward.*



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## **Stop Kroger's grocery shut-downs: 'It's all about greed'**

written by Struggle - La Lucha

April 16, 2021

Los Angeles — Kroger is the largest supermarket chain in the country. During the

pandemic the company increased its profits by 56%, to \$2.6 billion, while its workers risked their health and their lives to serve their communities.

So when the chain decided to close down five stores in the Los Angeles area, simply because the City Council voted to give the workers a temporary \$5-per-hour pay increase — in recognition of their courageous service and added needs during the pandemic — the community and the workers were understandably outraged.

Ronald Ford, a worker at the Kroger-owned Ralphs grocery store located in South Central LA, represented by United Food and Commercial Workers Local 770, said of the scheduled closure: “After 32 years working in this store, I see it’s all about greed, it’s never enough! Kroger should keep this store going. Don’t shut it down, people need jobs. Hazard pay is a blessing for me.”

Joe Crosby, president of the Harvard Boulevard Block Club, a South Central neighborhood association, reflected on the planned closing of that store: “My brother works at the Ralphs that’s closing. And our neighbors have already been hurt by a Ralphs that closed one block away a few years ago.

“We now have people here who are no longer able to get good food at a decent price, and it severely affects our people who are elderly and those who can’t get around as easily, and many people here depended on those jobs,” Crosby told Struggle-La Lucha.

“They can’t keep closing these stores just because they’re too greedy to share the huge profits they made during this pandemic.”

The Ralphs on Crenshaw Boulevard in South Central was the first store focused on by a newly-formed coalition of community groups. They held a protest April 3 in solidarity with the workers and to inform the community about Kroger’s plans to close the store in May.



## **Building labor/community solidarity**

The Harriet Tubman Center for Social Justice began planning the action there in mid-March and circulated announcements about the event at various union rallies and community gatherings. One of those flyers landed in a City Council staffer's lap, and he immediately called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which, unbeknownst to the Tubman Center, was also planning an action against the closures at another location.

The SCLC got in touch with the Tubman Center organizers, whom they had worked with previously. Both organizations were excited about the possibility of working together and bringing in other community groups.

At a planning meeting, the Tubman Center and SCLC were able to form a powerful coalition with the Baptist Ministers Conference of Southern California and local neighborhood organizations, the Families of Park Mesa Heights, Hyde Park Organizational Partnership for Empowerment and Harvard Boulevard Block Club, along with Unión del Barrio, Ground Game LA, Socialist Unity Party, LA Black Worker Center and United Workers Assembly.

The coalition also included a very powerful ally - UFCW Local 770 - and it was this labor/community partnership that was able to secure the jobs of the workers at the store with just the threat of a demonstration.

Ludmila Blanco, staffer at the union, told coalition members at a subsequent virtual planning meeting that management at the Ralphs said, a day before the demonstration, that even if the store closes the workers would be transferred and not lose their jobs. Previously they were scheduled for layoffs. A partial victory, and also a testament to the power of working-class unity.

SCLC organizer Alison Featherstone told the growing crowd at the beginning of the

April 3 rally at Ralphs: “We are so glad to be able to help bring all of these organizations together. We need to keep the momentum going to keep the store open and save the jobs of the 80 workers here.”

As to what the store managers were doing while the rally was taking place, Joe Crosby told SLL, “During the demonstration my brother told me the bosses were looking out the windows scared as hell.”

Another action was held on April 8 at a Food 4 Less scheduled for closure in East Hollywood, where a majority Latinx community will be affected. At this rally, organized by the union, managers didn’t have to look out the windows: Union members and the coalition of community organizations marched through the store, chanting “Save our store!”, right to the manager’s office.

As with the previous action, shoppers were shocked to hear the news of the closure and expressed the hardship that this would place on their families during the pandemic.

### **Expanding food deserts**

Closing these supermarkets will leave working-class communities, especially Black and Brown communities, with even less access to quality, fresh, affordable food, exacerbating the epidemic of “food deserts” littered with mostly unhealthy fast food and more expensive smaller grocery stores.

Given their importance to the community, many are asking what right Kroger has to take away these stores in the first place. “If the politicians were serious, they would consider using the law of Eminent Domain to keep these stores running and in the community,” said a speaker at the Ralphs rally.

Although Kroger’s chains here are frequented by the community and often packed, Kroger argues that the stores they are shutting down are now unprofitable. This, of

course, ignores the \$2.6 billion in profit Kroger made just since the beginning of the pandemic — the equivalent of two Fortune 500 companies — and the fact that the \$5 wage increase they blame is only temporary, lasting a few months.

As one protest sign said: “What’s \$2.6 Billion minus \$5?”

But even if Kroger’s specious claims were true, some believe that profit should not negate the more important needs of the community.

Pastor William D Smart, co-chair of the Ralphs rally and president of the SCLC in Los Angeles, declared, “This store, slated to be closed, would create a food desert in this area.

“They are lying about this store not being profitable. The people need this store, the community needs this store. Where do they go for food? People have to eat. They are disrespecting our community when they say they want to close this store. South LA needs every single grocery store.”

Rebecka Jackson, co-chair of the Ralphs protest and organizer for the Harriet Tubman Center, said: “In Cuba profits are never a consideration in ensuring essential services are accessible to all. The genocidal U.S. government should take a lesson from the revolutionary people’s government of Cuba. Access to fresh food is a human right and all workers should be provided for equally.”

The issues of profitability versus people’s needs, whether the arguments by the large monopoly grocery chains are true or false, and the right of communities to take over services that are vital to the survival of the community, will undoubtedly keep coming up.

One thing is certain: The centralization and technology involved in the ability to provide fresh and plentiful food at a relatively low cost to communities is desirable and was a step forward in humanity’s ability to feed itself. The only problem is who

owns the technology, the fulfillment and distribution centers.

It's clear here in South Central, anyway, that the community believes that the store, with all its infrastructure, belongs to them — as do the union jobs and hazard pay. It's the workers there who made those profits for Kroger and it's the community that paid for that store many times over with their purchases. So why not?

Photos: Scott Scheffer, Anthony Dawahare, UFCW Local 770



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# **National and local organizations demand Kroger stop closing stores over hero pay**

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# RALLY@

# Ralphs

TO STOP CLOSING  
STORES OVER  
HERO PAY!

4/3/21 - 12PM

3300 W. SLAUSON, L.A. 90043

HERO PAY-YES!  
STORES CLOSING  
NO!

JOBS

NO

LIES

KROGER  
IS A  
**CROOK**  
\$21MM  
CEO SALARY

APRIL 3, 1968

ON THIS DAY  
53 YEARS AGO,  
ON THE EVE OF HIS  
ASSASSINATION,  
DR. MARTIN LUTHER  
KING, JR. DELIVERED  
HIS "MOUNTAINTOP  
SPEECH"

"WE MEAN  
BUSINESS NOW  
AND WE ARE  
DETERMINED TO  
GAIN OUR  
RIGHTFUL PLACE  
IN GOD'S WORLD."



WEAR YOUR MASKS &  
PRACTICE SOCIAL DISTANCING

ORGANIZED BY: HARRIET TUBMAN CENTER FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF SO CAL, BAPTIST MINISTERS CONFERENCE OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, UNION DEL BARRIO, NATIONAL ACTION NETWORK, UNITED WORKERS ASSEMBLY, FAMILIES OF PARK MESA HEIGHTS, & HARVARD BOULEVARD BLOCK CLUB

JACK ENTERPRISES UNLIMITED

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Los Angeles — On April 3rd, community organizations will unite to protest against Kroger closing 3 stores in the LA county and 2 in Long Beach over the City Council's emergency ordinance, which provides all national retail and drug store employees a \$5 raise, expiring in July. The two Ralphs and a Food 4 Less in LA will be closing on May 15th, impacting 250 workers, their families and the surrounding communities. The lack of accountability in grocery chains negligence towards their employees have resulted in thousands of workers being infected by COVID and hundreds of deaths.

Kroger has stated the small raise to the workers will somehow end their ability to operate, yet Kroger's profits have increased by 56% to \$2.6 billion and its sales by 14% to \$120.8 billion during the pandemic.

Essential frontline workers across the globe have risked their lives during the pandemic, with many national grocers gaining all time profit margins. "After 32 yrs working in this store, I see It's all about greed, it's never enough! Kroger keep this store going! Don't shut it down, people need jobs! Hazard pay is a blessing for me!" stated Ronald Ford, a UFCW local 770 worker.

The rally will be held at one of the Ralphs stores set to close on 3300 Slauson Ave, Los Angeles, CA, demanding Kroger take back their announcement to close these crucial stores that supply fresh and accessible food to low income communities including the elderly and those who rely on public transportation. With the community outraged, many worry if the store locations will be replaced with an affordable grocer or at all. An already 12% increase in homelessness as of 2020 has also raised concerns that these locations will become hotspots for food deserts that are sweeping across LA county. These communities have struggled in the past with finding affordable prices and costs that can be covered from food stamps.

Commencement of the rally will begin at 12pm PST, with organization leaders and workers of Kroger speaking out against this attack and calling for solidarity at 1pm PST. The chosen date for the demonstration also sheds light to its historic significance in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s final speech "I've Been to the Mountaintop" to a crowd of 25,000 work, igniting the sanitation workers strike and expanding the civil rights movement. King affirmed the value of the sanitation workers' labor, saying, "Secondly, let us keep the issues where they are. The issue is injustice. The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers." The coalition organizations consist of the following and demand all frontline workers be paid a living wage NOW: Harriet Tubman Center for Social Justice, Southern Christian Leadership Conference of SoCal, UFCW Local 770, Baptist Ministers Conference of SoCal, Union Del Barrio, Community Coalition, National Action Network, United Workers Assembly, Families of Park Mesa Heights, and Harvard Boulevard Block Club.



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# Young workers are losing access to pensions — why?

written by Struggle - La Lucha  
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## **Do you know what a pension is?**

Millennials and zoomers — have you heard of pensions? Have you ever had a job that offered one? Some of us have, but we may be the exceptions.

As we grow older and more people come to join us in the working world, I'd bet money that — at least without a massive workers' movement — fewer and fewer people will have even heard of a pension.

For our more seasoned readers, it may shock you to learn that there are people in the world who don't know what a pension is, much less ever had access to one.

It's a reflection of capitalist decay. Decades and decades of privatization, austerity and union-busting have crushed the wages, benefits and protections the workers' movements won in the past.



Most jobs worked by younger people barely offer a 401(k) retirement plan, much less paid time off, sick leave or mileage reimbursement.

### **So what is a pension?**

The short version: pensions are deferred wages, paid out at a later date after you've retired.

A more pithy version: a pension is how you're going to survive when you're too old to work.

The default pension for most is Social Security, won through the militant labor struggles of the 1930s. Social Security is funded by taxes on your paycheck and on your employer. Of course your employer pays its share of the tax from your wages.

### **How did pensions come about?**

In the U.S., pensions existed in different forms starting as long ago as the early 1800s. Generally these were private enterprises or charitable drives led by religious communities. The Bureau of Pensions was established in 1832 to manage pensions for veterans of the War of Independence.

Pensions as we know them today were not widely available until after the New Deal and the Social Security Act of 1935. In short, this legislation created retirement income for senior workers, as well as unemployment insurance.

Social Security is not an employer-paid pension plan. Social Security is a federal government program. Social Security provided some relief from poverty for the elderly.

Franklin D. Roosevelt didn't just wake up one day and decide to push for this out of the kindness of his heart. The New Deal and Social Security was a result of the

blood, sweat and tears of a militant workers' movement. The New Deal was implemented to prevent a workers' revolution.

The massive crisis of capitalism called the Great Depression forced workers, poor and oppressed people to fight for their lives. Their movement had to face the truth that many of us are starting to recognize today — that only a socialist revolution would save them.

Amidst massive unrest, poverty, unemployment, and facing down a quickly-growing workers' movement, the ruling class knew they had to offer concessions in order to save the capitalist system. Pensions were one of these concessions.

Following World War II, with the expansion of U.S. imperialism and the resulting super-profits made by U.S. capitalists through their global industrial monopoly, workers in labor unions were able to win employer-paid private pensions on top of the skimpy pensions paid by the Social Security program.

Union workers also won employer-provided health care plans that made up for the absence of health care as a basic human right in the U.S. Pension plans and health care coverage became standard benefits for many jobs.

### **Why are pensions disappearing?**

Marxist leader Sam Marcy wrote "[High Tech, Low Pay](#)" in 1986 to explain the huge changes taking place in capitalist production and the changing character of the working class with the advent of major technological advancements. The technological advancements he wrote about, and their effects on workers and production, are still changing the world today.

The leaps and bounds in technology in the past few decades are driven by the capitalists' ever-present thirst for profits, rather than to meet peoples' needs. This means that new technological advancements are introduced for the purpose of

lowering labor costs — either reducing the overall “skills” required by workers in production, or entirely replacing workers with automation, sending entire labor forces to the unemployment line. Either way, workers pick up the cost.

At this late stage of capitalism, when the goal of imperialism has turned from attaining new markets and territories to maintaining its territories, the ruling class has to draw blood from stone. In other words, every market is already thoroughly saturated, and when imperialism has run out of markets to access, it has to find new ways to maintain profits.

In turn, jobs in the United States have begun to polarize sharply in two directions. On one end, you have service sector jobs without any hope for benefits; on the other end are relatively high-paying jobs that require degrees (aka student debt), which may or may not offer decent benefits.

Between the two are “gig”-type jobs that certainly don’t offer benefits, and public sector and healthcare sector jobs from which the bosses constantly try to strip away benefits, either through direct cutbacks or privatization.

Moreover, workers who already have pensions are frequently at risk of losing them. This is not just because of the constant attempts to cut them, but also because most pension plans have been converted to 401(k) plans. Legally 401(k) plans are not regulated like pension funds; that is, they are deregulated and open to speculation and manipulation. Pension plans guarantee a monthly check in retirement while a 401(k) does not offer any guarantees.

Wall Street controls most 401(k) plans and has been using some 401(k) funds to gamble in the stock market. [Recent controversy around GameStop stocks](#) highlighted the volatility of the stock market speculation.

Workers have no legal recourse. We just have to hope our pensions are there for us

when we retire.

### **How can I get a pension?**

Pensions came around because of militant workers' struggle. Pensions have started to disappear because of a vicious capitalist counter-offensive. It's in our hands to renew and broaden the workers' struggle for a living wage, safe workplaces and job benefits, but also to connect the workers' struggle to the struggle against racism, war and gender-based oppression.

Fight for a union; if you have a union, fight to make it fight!



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## **How a Black elevator operator helped forge the SEIU**

written by Struggle - La Lucha

April 16, 2021

One of the largest unions in the United States is the Service Employees International Union. Two million essential workers belong to it.

Hospital workers belonging to 1199SEIU are on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic. So are the SEIU members keeping thousands of buildings clean coast-to-coast.

An important battle to build the 175,000 member strong SEIU Local 32BJ was a 1934 strike. Its spark was the firing of Black elevator operator Thomas Young, an immigrant worker from the Caribbean.

At the time there were 20,000 elevator operators in New York City. Their labor was essential for Manhattan's old garment district.

Over 200,000 workers were employed there, often in 12-story high buildings. Ninety years ago they produced close to half of the clothing worn in the U.S.

Elevator operators were needed to move goods and workers from floor to floor. By the 1920s, most of the elevator operators in the United States were Black men.

Landlords paid them miserable wages and demanded that they act like obedient servants. A. Philip Randolph — who later led the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and helped organize the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom — tried unsuccessfully to organize elevator operators into a union.

## **1934 strike**

In November 1934, Thomas Young was fired for saying “step in, please” instead of “down, please.” The operators and other building workers had enough.

[They went on strike](#) to get a union and dignity. Strikers went from building to building in midtown Manhattan pulling out workers.

But how could they win? A quarter of the working class was jobless. There was no unemployment compensation.

Solidarity was the answer. The garment workers, most of whom were women, had reestablished the International Ladies Garment Workers Union the year before in New York City's dress shops. (Eighty years later the ILGWU joined other unions to form UNITE HERE!)

One of the ILGWU members who joined a sit-down strike was a teenager named Ethel Greenglass. At the age of 15 she graduated from Seward Park High School but had to go to work to support her family.

Within a generation the vast majority of ILGWU members were Puerto Rican and Black. Later, thousands of Dominican and Chinese workers were employed.

But in 1934, most of the workers came from Eastern and Southern European immigrant families. Many spoke Italian or Yiddish.

Garment workers and Teamsters refused to cross the picket lines of the strikers, many of whom were Black. New York City's then largest industry was shut down tight.

The Communist Party's daily newspaper in Yiddish, "Morgen Freiheit" (Morning Freedom), was read by thousands of garment workers. It called for all-out support for the strikers. Within four days the landlords were forced to sign a union contract with the elevator operators and other building workers. ("Local 32B-32J: Sixty Years of Progress")

### **The struggle continues**

Ninety years later Manhattan's Garment District is a memory. Sure, there's still some sample shops open.

But the vast majority of clothing sold in the United States is produced by super-exploited workers overseas. They need our solidarity just like the elevator operators

did in 1934.

Global capitalism gets more and more deadly. The March 25, 1911, Triangle Shirtwaist fire in Manhattan killed 146 workers, the vast majority of whom were women. The April 24, 2013, collapse of the Rana Plaza in Dhaka, Bangladesh, killed 1,134 workers — eight times as many.

The elevator operators are almost all gone as well. Black workers are often the first victims of automation.

Twenty thousand elevator operators lost their jobs in New York City. The jobs of 50,000 Black coal miners were eliminated between 1930 and 1980. (“Black Coal Miners in America,” by Ronald L. Lewis)

The young striker Ethel Greenglass married the electrical engineer Julius Rosenberg. Both activists were burned to death in the electric chair by the U.S. Government on June 19, 1953.

The Rosenbergs were framed during the anti-communist witch hunt for giving “atomic secrets” to the Soviet Union. W.E.B. DuBois gave a eulogy at their funeral, declaring these martyrs died because “they would not lie.”

## **Justice for janitors**

Despite these tragedies the working class continues to fight. Over the past 35 years, hundreds of thousands of building workers have joined the SEIU.

A hallmark of the union’s organizing efforts has been its “Justice for Janitors” campaign that was launched in Denver in 1985. In 2001 alone, 10,000 janitors working in the suburbs of cities like Washington D.C., Philadelphia and New York joined the SEIU.

Los Angeles was this movement's crucible. On June 15, 1990, the LAPD viciously attacked a demonstration of striking janitors, most were Latinx, who cleaned the gleaming office towers in Century City.

At least 148 people were injured, including a pregnant woman who miscarried. The city was eventually forced to pay \$2.35 million in damages to these SEIU Local 399 members and supporters.

The massive police violence was the turning point in a two year long organizing campaign. Visiting Danish trade unionists were appalled at the anti-union hostility of Danish-owned cleaning contractor ISS, which employed 250 of the 400 janitors in the Century City complex.

This outfit signed a union contract the same day its unionized New York operations were threatened by SEIU Local 32B-32J following the cop attack.

The 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion was sparked by the acquittal of sadists-in-blue who clubbed Rodney King 56 times. But the Century City police riot was part of the social tinder of the uprising. Just as the LAPD attack on the Nation of Islam's Muhammad Mosque No. 27 in 1962 — in which Ronald X. Stokes was killed — helped lead to the 1965 Watts Rebellion..

The struggle at Century City stopped a decade of union busting in Los Angeles office buildings. The number of janitors more than doubled there between 1980 and 1990, reaching a total of 28,883

Scab cleaning contractors were the norm in new office buildings. Already unionized outfits demanded wage cuts.

Building workers, many of whom were immigrants, revolted and organized. Ten years after the 1990 police riot they marched up Wilshire Boulevard — named after a real estate developer who became a socialist — and returned to Century City.



After nearly three weeks on strike they won a 26% wage hike for workers employed at 900 buildings across Los Angeles County.

Ninety-eight percent of these strikers were immigrants. Eighty per cent from Central America. Fifty-five percent women. (“A Clean Sweep”, by Harold Meyerson, The American Prospect, June 19, 2000)

The fighting spirit of these Latinx immigrant workers, overwhelmingly women, revitalized the labor movement throughout Southern California. There’s a little bit of Thomas Young and Ethel Rosenberg in “Justice for Janitors.”



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## **Demand for hazard pay spreads on West Coast. Kroger threatens closures**

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In response to simmering anger, several cities in California as well as the city of Seattle have mandated hazard pay for essential workers. The California Grocers Association is suing and Kroger, the largest supermarket chain in the world, is refusing to pay and threatening to close two supermarkets permanently in retaliation.

There are corporate-sponsored billboards atop buildings and along the highways, from Times Square in New York City to the freeways of Los Angeles, thanking and honoring frontline workers for putting themselves in harm's way during the pandemic. But the lofty messages lose all meaning alongside the actual treatment of those workers by their capitalist bosses.

Supermarkets have become [dangerous places to work](#) and many of them have been hotspots for COVID-19 during the pandemic. According to United Food and Commercial Workers, the union that represents 1.3 million workers, more than 400 grocery workers have died during the pandemic and 20,000 have been infected. Throughout the months there have been protests by unionized grocery workers demanding more safety precautions, hazard pay and more paid sick time.

Long Beach, Calif., was the first city to mandate hazard pay by giant grocery chains. Santa Monica soon followed suit. Now Los Angeles and Oakland have passed their own hazard pay laws. San Jose and Berkeley are expected to join in, as is Santa Clara County.

But bosses will be bosses. Last month when Long Beach made an extra \$4 per hour in “hero pay” mandatory, the owner of two supermarkets — Ralphs and a Food4Less — announced it would shut them down for good rather than pay the \$4. The owner is Kroger Corporation, whose profits increased by a whopping 90% last year. The average pay for clerks and cashiers at Kroger-owned supermarkets in southern California is a little over \$10 an hour, so the “hero pay” does not even bring the average up to the \$15 an hour minimum. If it goes through with its vendetta, some 200 workers in Long Beach will lose their jobs.

### **Kroger raked in \$122 billion**

Kroger profited from the pandemic when restaurants closed and millions of people began cooking at home more. In 2020 they raked in \$122 billion. Every cent of it came to them because grocery workers took on the risk of reporting for work every day, during this deadliest pandemic in a century.

It is no surprise that Kroger chose Long Beach to challenge the modest demand for hazard pay. Over decades, most southern California beach cities saw wealthy, mostly-white people move in to enjoy the climate and the beach. At the same time,

working-class people tried to escape skyrocketing rents by moving to the desert towns and cities that lie to the east, leaving behind affluent beach cities.

But Long Beach is different. More than 30,000 people from the city work at the Port of Long Beach, as well as more than 300,000 people from other parts of southern California. There is a giant oil field in the Signal Hill area. Even though the city's manufacturing jobs have dwindled like the rest of the country, it has remained solidly working-class and become more diverse. Sixty percent of the population of Long Beach are people of color and immigrants. This was the perfect city for Kroger to go on the attack and set an example.

Hazard pay is supposed to be included in a White House-initiated COVID relief bill. But what is included in that bill would be essentially a handout to the corporations — giant grocers like Kroger wouldn't have to pay an extra dime. The city mandates for hazard pay that have been passed during the last month would mean it would come out of the owners' pockets. But the bosses see that as setting a dangerous precedent.

Unionized grocery workers and other essential workers have been fighting for hazard pay and on other issues regarding the dangers of being in constant contact with so many people. UFCW members have been organizing around the issues regularly throughout the entire pandemic, and there have been protests by progressive organizations in solidarity.

In March 2020, Whole Foods workers, Amazon workers, and the gig workers who deliver for Instacart walked off the job in a one-day job action. At the end of April, Amazon, Target, Walmart, Instacart and FedEx workers did another work stoppage. In July, something occurred that must have shaken the corporate ruling class. The anger over treatment of essential workers — who are overwhelmingly Black and Brown — hooked up with the movement for Black Lives in the form of walkouts. They joined the powerful mass marches throughout the country after the murder of

George Floyd and other victims of racist police, and the marches also demanded economic justice and the right to a union.

Because of this simmering resentment and rage over the last year, and especially during this third deadly COVID-19 surge, city governments throughout California and in the state of Washington see the handwriting on the wall. Though the greedy Kroger grocery store billionaires are intransigent, city government functionaries are concerned about the direction the struggle for hazard pay and real respect for workers may go. Sometimes the role of capitalist government is to force part of the capitalist class to do something for its own good. There is already an historic union drive in the Birmingham suburban area of Bessemer, Ala., where 5,800 Amazon warehouse workers are having a union election — brought on by worsening and dangerous conditions during the pandemic.

Capitalists and those who serve them feel desperate to stop the pandemic from becoming a flashpoint in a resurgent workers movement. Of those cities that instituted the hazard pay laws it remains to be seen how willing they are to enforce them. They're not exactly in a position of power against giant corporations. But working-class history has shown that if the 'sleeping giant' that is the working-class awakens, Kroger and the other giant corporations will wish they paid the hazard pay.



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# A Minimum Wage? A Fake Debate

written by Struggle - La Lucha  
April 16, 2021



Capitalism's "conservative" defenders yet again oppose raising the minimum wage. They fought raising it in the past much as they tried to prevent the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938) that first mandated a U.S. minimum wage. The major argument opponents have used is this: setting or raising a minimum wage threatens small employers. They may collapse or else fire employees; either way, jobs are lost. What is conveniently assumed here is a necessary contradiction between minimum wages and small business jobs. That assumption enables opponents to claim that not setting a legal minimum wage, like not raising it, saves jobs. The system thus presents very poorly paid workers with this choice: low wages or no wages.

"Liberals" in the United States have mostly accepted the assumption of that contradiction, the necessity of that final choice. However, they try to demonstrate that the social gains from a higher minimum wage would exceed the social losses from the reduced employment they admit. Their idea, in effect, is that a higher minimum wage would increase demand for goods and services. Any workers fired because of the minimum wage would be rehired elsewhere to meet the rising demand. Countless empirical studies by conservatives and liberals yield, as usual, correspondingly conflicting conclusions.

In the actual history of U.S. capitalism, the minimum wage has been undercut from the outset. In real terms (what the minimum wage can actually buy), its long-term decline began from a peak in 1968. It was last raised in 2009 (to \$7.25 per hour) despite a rising consumer price index every year since then. U.S. business interests plus the "conservative" politicians, media, and academics they support have inundated the public with the idea that raising the minimum wage will hurt poorly paid workers (by losing mostly small business jobs) more than help them. This debate over the minimum wage, intensified whenever proposals to raise it gain public attention, has been "won" chiefly by the conservative/business side.

Despite its political effectiveness for conservatives and big business till now, their

argument—like the entire debate—is flawed logically. Its underlying, shared assumption is unnecessary and inaccurate. It serves chiefly to undercut the level, purpose, and social effects of the minimum wage in the United States.

Paying a decent living wage to workers by raising the minimum wage need not threaten the viability of small businesses. The latter need not collapse nor fire workers when minimum wages are raised. Indeed, raising the minimum wage can and should be one basis for a mutually beneficial alliance between wage workers and small businesses.

Few dare quarrel with the notion that in the U.S. today, paying the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour is an outrage against decency. It is among the very lowest minimum wages of industrialized economies: quite the achievement for one of the “richest countries in the world.” So the defense of such an outrage has always begun by focusing attention elsewhere. We are asked to sympathize with the small businesses whose profits and thus viability will be undone if they are required to pay a raised minimum wage. We are asked likewise to sympathize with the plight of minimum wage workers who will become jobless when their employer cannot pay a raised minimum wage. Thus the conclusion beloved by opponents of raising the minimum wage: it lies in the interest of low-paid workers and small businesses to join the opposition to raising the minimum wage.

So many flaws attend such logic that it is not easy to decide where to begin its demolition. We might note that it clearly implies that were we to drop the minimum wage even further, below \$7.25 per hour, we might achieve lower unemployment rates. But that is so gross an idea that right-wingers rarely go there. They don’t dare.

There is a parallel example we can draw from the history of wage workers when they included children as young as five years old. The parallel logic then held that allowing child labor (with the oppression and abuses it entailed) was doing poor



families a favor. Were child labor to be outlawed, capitalism's defenders then insisted, two tragedies would necessarily follow. First, poor families would suffer an income loss because they could no longer sell their children's labor power to capitalist employers for a wage. Second, businesses whose profits depended at least partly on low-wage child labor would collapse and render adults jobless too.

It is important to note that after sustained political agitation, child labor was in fact outlawed. The logic of its defenders was rejected and rarely resurfaced afterward even in right-wing and "conservative" literature. Former capitalist employers of children found other means (paying adults more, improving productivity, economizing on other inputs, and so on) to profit and grow. As we know, U.S. capitalism over the last century prospered without child labor. And where U.S. capitalists relocated abroad to employ children, opposition there has replicated what happened in the United States, albeit slowly. What happened to child labor can and likely will happen as well to abysmally low minimum wages.

How then might a civilized society raise its minimum wage to provide a decent livelihood to workers and protect its small businesses? The solution is straightforward. Offset the extra labor costs for small businesses from a higher minimum wage by providing them with some combination of the following: a new and significant share of government orders, tax breaks, and government subsidies. Such supports now overwhelmingly favor big business and thereby facilitate its many efforts to destroy and replace small businesses. Those supports should be reapportioned with special consideration/targeting for small businesses. To be eligible, small businesses would need to show how raising the minimum wage increased their total wage bill. In this way, society can concretely support small business and a decent minimum wage as twin, shared social values.

In effect, this proposal changes the terrain of the minimum wage debate. It brings into stark relief that raising the minimum wage leaves open the question of which

part of the employer class will bear the burden of compensating for that in the short run. An effective political coalition of low-wage workers and small businesses could require big business to pay by losing some of its government business, paying higher taxes, or obtaining lower subsidies—all to compensate small businesses for a raised minimum wage. For decades, an alternative political coalition—of big and small business—blocked or delayed minimum wage increases. Nothing requires this latter coalition to always or, indeed, ever prevail over a competing coalition of labor and small business that seeks a higher minimum wage for one plus greater state supports for the other. Likewise, nothing warrants continuing the current debate over raising the minimum wage as if only small business would always have to absorb its possible costs.

The debate over the minimum wage has been lopsided for a very long time. Uncritical media coverage of the debate has allowed big business to evade its proper share of paying to sustain a viable small business sector. Meanwhile, workers and small businesses pay taxes that favor big business. Most Americans want a thriving small business sector. Most also increasingly criticize big business: “antitrust” remains part of government regulation as well as a part of popular ideologies. We can and should correct the old debate now to enable a different political coalition to shape minimum wages in a different way from the past.

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# **Solidarity with the Bessemer, Alabama, Amazon workers in their fight for a union**

written by Struggle - La Lucha  
April 16, 2021

# Alabama Amazon workers right to a union!

**RESPECT**

**HAZARD PAY FOR  
ALL ESSENTIAL WORKERS**



**Open Letter to Jeff Bezos and the Alabama Amazon workers**

*From former Baltimore Amazon workers*

Dear Bezos and Amazon workers,

We are sending all of our support, love and solidarity to the Bessemer, Alabama, Amazon workers in their fight for a union and for workers power.

Trust us we know how brutal warehouse conditions are: the impossible quotas and pressure to keep up; the lack of safety and concern for workers who are risking their lives during this pandemic without hazard pay; the constant monitoring of our every move; breaks that are way too short and bathrooms that are way too far and so much more.

**Like Rosa Parks and the civil rights movement, Bessemer workers are leading the way.**

We salute your courage given everything that the company has done to discourage, intimidate and stop workers from having a fair vote. Shame on you, Amazon, that you would oppose mail in votes.

**Win or lose, no one will forget this battle against workplace injustice.**

**What will be remembered, Jeff Bezos, is your greed and callousness during this pandemic.**

You made thirteen billion (\$13,000,000,000) in one day after the pandemic caused Amazon's stock price to surge. This set a record for the largest single day increase in individual wealth ever recorded. Yes, corona cash has been good for you, Bezos, despite the fact that 20,000 workers have tested positive, and that you withdrew hazard pay while you were cashing in.

**You could have taken that one day, corona windfall and paid all 876,000**

**Amazon workers a \$105,000 bonus each.**

The Alabama workers battle is truly a fight between David and Goliath, that is taking place in the birthplace of the civil rights movement. We must all pick a side; as the union song goes “Which side are you on?”

**We urge everyone to pick the side of the Bessemer, Alabama workers!**

*Yours for United Workers Action,*

Sharon Black, Rasika Ruwanpathirana, Steven Ceci  
Former Baltimore Amazon warehouse workers



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## **The Senate says no to \$15**

written by Struggle - La Lucha  
April 16, 2021





The United States Senate voted unanimously against raising the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$15 per hour. Not a single senator yelled “nay” in a Feb. 4 voice vote that prohibited the pay increase.

Could any of these senators live on \$7.25 per hour? Hell, none of them could live on \$70 an hour! They take home \$174,000 per year.

The amendment offered by Iowa Sen. Joni Ernst prevents raising the wage during the COVID-19 pandemic. It’s a slap in the face to millions of essential workers, many of whom earn poverty wages but deserve much more.

[Ernst claims](#) that “a \$15 federal minimum wage would be devastating for our hardest-hit small businesses at a time when they can least afford it.”

This is the same old argument that claims a small business “can’t afford safety equipment.” It’s too bad a worker had their hand cut off. At least they had a job.

The labor movement’s answer is that if a capitalist can’t afford to operate their business safely, they shouldn’t be in business. The same applies to poverty wages.

Sen. Ernst’s crocodile tears about small business shouldn’t fool anybody. She has never complained about Walmart, which drove thousands of mom and pop stores out of business.

The current \$7.25 federal minimum wage is actually a 40% cut from what it could buy in 1968. To match the buying power of the 1968 wage, \$12.19 would be required, [according to](#) the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ inflation calculator.

The wage cut of nearly \$5 per hour amounts to over \$10,000 stolen from workers over an entire year of 40-hour workweeks. The tens of billions of additional profits are supersized wage theft. Millions of workers who may get tips [don’t even qualify for \\$7.25](#).

### **\$15 will be won on the streets**

In a surprising move, Sen. Bernie Sanders also supported the Ernst amendment. His excuse was that this would prevent an immediate vote on a bill to increase the minimum wage, which would probably lose.

Several Democratic senators, including Manchin from West Virginia and Teeter from Montana, oppose a \$15 wage. That’s what the AFL-CIO leadership gets in return for endorsing these politicians.



Sanders' action will be confusing and probably demoralizing to millions of people who consider the Vermont senator as their champion. What difference does it make if raising the minimum wage is shot down by an amendment or by a losing vote on an actual bill?

Here's how Sanders explained his position: "It was never my intention to increase the minimum wage to \$15 immediately and during the pandemic. My legislation gradually increases the minimum wage to \$15 an hour over a five-year period and that is what I believe we have got to do."

Well, millions of workers need that \$15 and more right now. Landlords aren't waiting five years to collect their rent.

One of the demands of the 1963 March for Jobs and Freedom — where Dr. King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech — was a \$2 minimum wage. Its biggest advocate was A. Philip Randolph, the protest's organizer and leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

According to the inflation calculator, a minimum wage of \$16.97 would be required to match the \$2 per hour that was demanded in August 1963.

The only way we can overcome a bought-and-paid-for Congress is for millions of people to take to the streets.



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# **CTU forces Mayor Lightfoot to back down as Chicago Public Schools continue remote learning**

written by Struggle - La Lucha  
April 16, 2021

## **Teachers demand safety before returning to classrooms**

Chicago — Students in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) stayed home and learned remotely again on Thursday, January 28. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) continued to demand that any return to in-person learning be done in a safe way. Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot had ordered all teachers back to the classroom on Wednesday the 27th but was forced to backtrack and tell parents to keep their kids home again Thursday.

CPS has been demanding that 80% of school staff return in person and has refused

to allow accommodations for staff who live in households with people who are in high-risk categories according to the Centers for Disease Control. CPS has also refused to provide weekly testing for unvaccinated staff and students at schools. In binding arbitration on Oct. 2, CPS was ordered to allow school clerks and technology coordinators to work remotely, but the school system has yet to comply with that order.

The Chicago Teachers Union is seeking a health metric based on CDC guidance, a phased reopening, access to vaccinations for educators, and enforceable safety standards in school buildings, which have struggled to meet even basic needs for PPE, adequate ventilation and clean facilities. Because Mayor Lori Lightfoot's CPS team has refused to offer vaccinations to educators before ordering them into school buildings, and has not been willing to agree to a phased-in resumption of in-person learning, the Chicago Teachers Union has now publicly called for mediation to resolve the impasse.

The teachers say that they continue to teach and want to continue to teach safely. To that end, their union has proposed critical precautions necessary for a safe return to in-person learning, but all of those precautions have been rejected by the Board of Education.

CTU President Jesse Sharkey said, "We are willing to keep teaching, but CPS has said they will lock us out. We are willing to keep negotiating, but CPS has refused to back down from insisting that 80% of educators and support staff return on February 1 to serve fewer than 20% of the students. Another 10,000 of our members became eligible for vaccinations on Jan. 25. We can make schools safe with a phased reopening and enhanced COVID-19 testing for members of school communities."

"It's obvious to everyone but CPS and the mayor that parents aren't sending their children back because they do not believe schools are safe or that COVID is under control," said CTU Vice President Stacy Davis Gates. "This is especially true for

Black and brown families. CPS does not need 80% of educators back in school to serve 19% of students. This makes no sense in a pandemic that continues to infect one in eight people in many of the Black and brown Chicago neighborhoods that have already shouldered a disproportionate burden of COVID disease and death. Our families want safety. Our educators want safety, yet CPS continues to refuse to negotiate an agreement that builds in that safety, and instead, has threatened to lock out tens of thousands of educators who have a right to safe workplaces to educate our schoolchildren.”

Only 19% of eligible students returned to pre-K and special education cluster programs on Jan. 11, and in some cases teachers are being told to come in to schools in which not one family has opted in to the hybrid model in person learning, which shows that there is broad agreement in the community that the current CPS plan is not safe.

Source: [FightBack! News](#)

