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USA

Workers' Struggle to Organize Amazon Faces Challenges

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Earlier this month, workers at an Amazon warehouse in Staten Island in New York City, won a union representation vote by 2,6543 to 2,131 out of the roughly 8,000 workers eligible to vote. That election, which created the first unionized Amazon workplace in the United States, is now being challenged at the National Labor Relations Board by Amazon which is arguing that the labor board favored the union and that the union coerced workers.

While labor lawyers say this challenge seems unlikely to win, it will slow down the process of the union winning a first contract for these workers. It typically takes a union three years to win a first contract.

At another NLRB election held at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama at the same time, 993 workers voted against a different union there, while 875 vote in favor, but over 400 ballots have been contested and there is no final tally yet. It will be several weeks before a labor board hearing leads to a final decision on the union there.

These two elections make it clear that Amazon will use all of its wealth and power to fight unionization. Amazon spent \$4.2 million to stop the workers' Amazon Labor Union at Staten Island. The company fired some rank-and-file union organizers and had others arrested for trespassing, now its lawyers work to overturn the election.

At the same time, workers have suggested that they will expand the fight to other workplaces. Chris Smalls, the leader of the Staten Island effort, said that he had been contacted by people from fifty other Amazon workplaces, most of them in the United States but others in South Africa, India, Canada, and the U.K. In a public radio interview he said, "We, as workers, the working class, have got to realize our value. If we don't go to work, these CEOs don't make their money. So, if workers can realize that no matter where you work in this country, what you're doing, then you can form a group that can collectively bargain.

That's what I think we witnessed on April 1st — we were able to share this experience with the world and let everybody know that any ordinary person can take down the most powerful company or retailer, or whatever, no matter how big or small."

Media of all sorts has been flooded with interviews with Smalls and other activists and accounts of their organizing: worker-led and based on hundreds of conversations with other workers in the plant, discussions held around barrels of burning wood at bus stops. While other unions spent large sums on salaries for professional organizers who had never worked at Amazon, relied on public relations, and brought in politicians unknown to the workers, the Staten Island experience was based entirely on the workers' themselves. This has sparked a national conversation about how unions should organize. Such grassroots activism represents both a new possibility and a threat to existing unions, highly bureaucratic, legalistic, and largely ineffective.

The recent victory in New York also raises other questions. Organizers of the Staten Island facility never called upon workers in the plant to take any direct action against the company. While workers reportedly did disrupt the company's captive-audience meetings, there were no slowdowns and no work stoppages. Workers relied entirely on the government supervised vote.

As workers fight to defend their victory at Staten Island, to organize at other plants, and then to win labor union contracts, the history of the labor movement suggests that they will have to be prepared to use their power to be successful. When workers do use their power in large strikes, the experience can rapidly become contagious and

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spread throughout the working class. This has happened throughout history: France, the United States, and Mexico in the 1930s, Poland, Brazil, South Korea, and South Africa in the 1980s, in Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring, and more recently in Algeria and Sudan. Can it happen in the United States today?

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