

Voting ends on forming Amazon's first US union

March 29 2021, by Julie Jammot



A union supporter stands outside during a shift change before sunrise at the Amazon center on March 29 in Bessemer, Alabama, at the conclusion of a months-long organizing effort

Voting concluded Monday on whether to create the first Amazon labor

union in the United States, at a warehouse in Alabama, after a historic, five-month David versus Goliath battle.

Attention has now turned to ballot counting by federal officials following a contentious unionization campaign which has drawn national attention and the involvement of numerous political figures and activists.

The lobbying continued to the bitter end with labor activists from around the United States meeting workers before dawn to congratulate them for their efforts.

The National Labor Relations Board, the federal agency which manages union elections, was set to begin the count on Tuesday. The final results could take several days or weeks, given that some ballots may be challenged based on errors in signature or other factors.

"Today is the beginning of the less fun part for us" including the ballot counting and legal challenges, said Joshua Brewer, the local president of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, which would represent the 5,800 employees if a majority votes in favor.

"I think we're happy for the country that's really paying attention, and really (it is) just a continuation of what they were already looking at, which is a shrinking middle class or rising income inequality and so we're proud of that."

The bruising months-long battle has sparked intense debate over workplace conditions at the tech and e-commerce behemoth, which has more than 800,000 US employees.

Coming at a time when Joe Biden has promised to be the country's "most pro-union president," the Bessemer effort could open the floodgates to organizing drives at other Amazon sites, as well as at other firms.

Unions and political leaders have argued that Amazon employees face constant pressure and monitoring, with little job protection, highlighting the need for collective bargaining.

Amazon has argued that most of its workers don't want or need a union and that it already provides more than most other employers, with a minimum \$15 hourly wage and other benefits.



Union supporters distribute information before sunrise

Workplace pressures

For five months, union organizers in Bessemer have been posted at the intersection outside the warehouse, making their case.

"We need safe working conditions. We need to be treated with respect and equality," said Amazon employee Jennifer Bates.

Sondra Hill, a 61-year-old part-time packer at Amazon, said she was hopeful about the vote.

"If it doesn't work out, it doesn't stop here," she said. "I'm staying to see this happen, without this effort to unionize I would most likely leave, because people deserve better."

Another employee, Lafonda Townsend, said she was initially happy with her pay; but that she is forced to eat fast on breaks "like a prisoner... because if you're one minute late, there's an hour unpaid time."

Amazon spokeswoman Heather Knox defended the company and claimed the union had misrepresented its practices.

"Our employees know the truth—starting wages of \$15 (hourly) or more, health care from day one, and a safe and inclusive workplace," Knox said. "We encouraged all of our employees to vote and hope they did so."

Both sides have traded accusations about tactics. Amazon acknowledged that it hosted information sessions to allow employees to "understand the facts of joining a union and the election process," including union dues.



The Amazon.com, Inc. BHM1 fulfillment center is seen on March 29, 2021 in Bessemer, Alabama

'Maintain power'

Amazon, which went on a hiring spree in 2020 and nearly doubled its net profit to \$21 billion, thanks to the explosion in demand during the pandemic, is embroiled in clashes with political leaders and the public over its policies.

A feud has escalated with left-wing politician Bernie Sanders, who supports the union, among others.

The company dismissed reports that workers had been reduced to

urinating in plastic bottles because of a lack of time to go to the bathroom.

Some observers say the issue is less about finances, and more about control.

"Big tech companies, like other employers, will spend an almost unlimited amount of money in persuading workers not to unionize," said Rebecca Givan, a professor of labor relations at Rutgers University.

Dawn Hoag, a warehouse quality manager, believes employees don't need representatives to voice their needs.

"If... all these stories were all true, then there are 5,800 idiots working inside the building where I work, and I don't work with a single idiot, and I'm not an idiot," she told AFP.

But Darryl Richardson, the 51-year-old employee who first called in the RWSDU, said it was time to "take a stand."

"I need job security. I need to be able to retire one day," he said.

Brewer said the vote had already inspired many other workers.

"We have received over 1,000 different inquiries from about 50 different warehouses so far," he said.

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