

Amazon tries to stave off union drive on two fronts

March 26 2022, by Haleluya Hadero, Anne D'innocenzio and Jay Reeves



In this March 30, 2021 file photo, a banner encouraging workers to vote in labor balloting is shown at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Ala. Amazon is gearing up for its toughest labor fight yet, with two separate union elections coming to a head as soon as next week that could provide further momentum to the recent wave of organizing efforts across the country. Warehouse workers in Staten Island, N.Y., and Bessemer, Ala., will determine whether or not they want to form a union. Credit: AP Photo/Jay Reeves, File

Amazon is gearing up for its toughest labor fight yet, with two separate union elections coming to a head as soon as next week that could provide further momentum to the recent wave of organizing efforts across the country.

Warehouse workers in Staten Island, New York, and [Bessemer, Alabama](#), will determine whether or not they want to form a union. If a majority votes yes at either location, it would mark the first successful U.S. organizing effort in Amazon history. Rejection would notch another victory for the country's second-largest employer in keeping unions at bay.

Here's what the elections will look like in Bessemer and Staten Island:

THE VOTING

Last April, workers in Bessemer overwhelmingly voted against a union bid, providing a bitter defeat for a labor movement that had already been declining in influence but making some gains during the pandemic. Federal labor officials later scrapped the results and ordered a re-do, ruling Amazon tainted the election process.

Ballots for the second election were mailed to 6,100 employees in early February. The counting process is expected to start on Monday and could last for several days.

Meanwhile, Amazon workers in the Staten Island warehouse began in-person voting Friday in their first union election. The facility is one of Amazon's largest in New York City with more than 8,300 employees. Voting will wrap up Wednesday, with the counting expected to begin shortly thereafter.



People arrive for work at the Amazon distribution center in the Staten Island borough of New York, Monday, Oct. 25, 2021. Amazon is gearing up for its toughest labor fight yet, with two separate union elections coming to a head as soon as next week that could provide further momentum to the recent wave of organizing efforts across the country. Warehouse workers in Staten Island, N.Y., and Bessemer, Ala., will determine whether or not they want to form a union. Credit: AP Photo/Craig Ruttle, File

UNION SUPPORT

The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union is once again spearheading the drive at the Alabama facility. More than 150 organizers from the union, as well as from roughly 20 other labor groups were on the ground since last summer—a bigger push than in the first

election—to galvanize support. Vaccines made it easier during the ongoing pandemic to knock on workers' doors and also visit barbershops, stores and other places to distribute flyers and chat with residents.

Pulling off a win could still be tough. There's high turnover at the facility, making it difficult to build momentum. At the same time, organizers estimate about half of current workers were eligible to vote in the last election, offering the RWDSU a chance to tap new workers who may be more amenable to a union.

In Staten Island, Amazon workers are currently organizing under the independent Amazon Labor Union led by Chris Smalls, a former employee who says he was fired after leading a protest over the warehouse's working conditions in the early days of the pandemic. (Amazon said he violated COVID-19 safety protocols.)

The nascent union seeks to negotiate [higher wages](#), more paid time off and other benefits for workers, 100 of which sit on its worker committee. Some of them have been wearing shirts and masks with the group's logo during [work shifts](#). Others have been handing out pro-union fliers after work and encouraging their co-workers to unionize.

NEW YORK VS. ALABAMA

The union landscape in Alabama is starkly different from New York.

Last year, union members accounted for 22.2% of wage and salary workers in New York, ranked only behind Hawaii, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That's more than double the national average of 10.3%. In Alabama, it's 5.9%.

Alabama is also a right-to-work state, which prohibit a company and a union from signing a contract that requires workers to pay dues to the

union that represents them. Pro-labor experts say many may feel intimidated by companies that could undermine the unionized shop.



Chris Smalls, president of the Amazon Labor Union, joins supporters at the Amazon distribution center in the Staten Island borough of New York, Monday, Oct. 25, 2021, as he holds "Authorization of Representation" forms that were earlier delivered to the National Labor Relations Board in New York. Amazon is gearing up for its toughest labor fight yet, with two separate union elections coming to a head as soon as next week that could provide further momentum to the recent wave of organizing efforts across the country. Warehouse workers in Staten Island, N.Y., and Bessemer, Ala., will determine whether or not they want to form a union. Credit: AP Photo/Craig Ruttle, File

New York is not a right-to-work state, and Amazon is attempting to use

that to its advantage. The company is telling workers it could fire them should they unionize but fail to pay union dues. But that requirement is not an across-the board mandate for non-right-to-work states and is something that is negotiated during union contracts, said Jennifer Sherer, senior state policy coordinator at the left-leaning Economic Policy Institute.

THE WORKERS

The mostly Black workforce at the Alabama facility, which opened in 2020, mirrors the Bessemer population of more than 70% Black residents, according to the latest U.S. Census data. There's little public transportation, so many of the Amazon workers drive to the facility from as far away as metro Montgomery, nearly 100 miles to the south.

Pro-union workers say they want better working conditions, longer breaks and higher wages. Regular full-time employees at the Bessemer facility earn at least \$15.80 an hour, higher than the estimated \$14.55 per hour on average in the city. That figure is based on an analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's annual median household income for Bessemer of \$30,284, which could include more than one [worker](#).

At Amazon's Staten Island facility, which opened in 2018, workers earn a minimum hourly wage just over \$18, much lower than the estimated \$41 per hour average for the borough, according to a similar U.S. Census Bureau analysis of Staten Island's \$85,381 median household income.

Workers from across the New York metro area trek long distances to get to the company's warehouse, many times alternating between the subway, a ferry and 40-minute long public bus rides.

The ALU said it doesn't have a demographic breakdown of the warehouse workers in Staten Island and Amazon declined to provide the

information to The Associated Press, citing the union vote. But internal records leaked to [The New York Times](#) from 2019 showed more than 60% of the hourly associates at the facility were Black or Latino, while most of managers were white or Asian.



In this photo taken from video, Amazon workers line up outside the company's Staten Island warehouse to vote on unionization, Friday, March 25, 2022, in New York. Amazon is gearing up for its toughest labor fight yet, with two separate union elections coming to a head as soon as next week that could provide further momentum to the recent wave of organizing efforts across the country. Warehouse workers in Staten Island, New York and Bessemer, Ala., will determine whether or not they want to form a union. Credit: AP Photo/Robert Bumsted

AMAZON'S STRATEGY

Amazon sees unions as a threat to its business model built on speedy deliveries to customers.

"As a company, we don't think unions are the best answer for our employees," an Amazon spokesperson said in a emailed statement. "Our focus remains on working directly with our team to continue making Amazon a great place to work."

The online retail giant continues to hammer the message that it offers benefits such as health care, 401(k) plans and a prepaid college tuition program to help grow workers' careers. It launched a website for workers at both warehouses that casts doubt on the benefit of unions and has been blasting out mailings, text messages, emails and flyers.

It has also relied on consultants and managers to hold mandatory staff meetings to talk about why unions are a bad idea. Such meetings stopped in Bessemer, right before the ballots were sent on Feb. 4, in accordance with labor regulations. But it could continue in Staten Island until 24 hours before the in-person vote was scheduled to begin on Friday.

A company spokesperson said the meetings give employees the opportunity to ask questions and learn what a union "could mean for them and their day-to-day life working at Amazon."

In Bessemer, Amazon has made some changes to but still kept a controversial U.S. Postal Service mailbox that was key in the NLRB's decision to invalidate last year's vote. In February, police arrested Smalls after Amazon officials said he was trespassing while delivering food to workers in Staten Island. Two other current pro-[union](#) employees were arrested with him for obstructing governmental administration charges.

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