

# A new kind of union is forming at Amazon Fresh stores in Seattle

March 9 2022, by Lauren Rosenblatt

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The push to unionize Amazon has come to Seattle—but it won't play out in the same way as other union drives.

Instead of warehouse workers, it's focused on those Amazon employees serving lunches and stocking grocery shelves. Instead of an organizing

campaign that culminates in a formal vote to determine whether the facility will unionize, this group has declared it already is a union.

Workers at an Amazon Fresh grocery [store](#) at 23rd Avenue South and South Jackson Street in Seattle's Central District have been organizing for months to form an independent union, Amazon Workers United, according to union member and Amazon employee Joseph Fink.

The union was "created by us, for us," Fink said, and is part of an effort to create a safer and healthier work environment for all Amazon workers. It's demanding higher pay and better working conditions, and is spreading its message to other Amazon Fresh stores in Seattle. Fink said workers at three locations in the area are planning to form unions in their own stores.

On Thursday, Amazon Workers United accused Amazon of retaliating against their union efforts by announcing the closure of several bookstores across the country. Amazon says those allegations are false and that it is closing those brick and mortar stores to focus more efforts on its grocery business. It doesn't recognize the union at Amazon Fresh.

"People in that store are unhappy, disgruntled, disillusioned, just downright sick of the way they're being treated," Fink said. "We will continue to organize and we will continue to do everything in our power to push them and put pressure on them."

Fink, a 28-year-old Central District resident whose career has included work in 12 grocery stores, says the union drive started before the Amazon Fresh store opened to the public in August.

As they were preparing the store for opening day, workers were told they could eat leftover food that was about to be thrown out, like the egg rolls from the hot bar that Amazon Fresh typically replaces every two hours.

But, Fink says, management reversed that policy unexpectedly and disciplined employees for a change they weren't aware of and didn't understand.

That kicked off a "really intense culture of fear," Fink said. "The conversation was already there, people were already looking for this type of resource and support. There was a lot of confusion about, 'Why don't we have a union?'"

Since then, Fink left the store, worked a stint at an Amazon warehouse in Kent over the busy holiday season and then returned to Amazon Fresh this year to continue organizing with colleagues.

The union drive at Amazon Fresh is playing out as unions across the nation and industries are shining a light on workers' demands. In Chicago, Amazon warehouse workers staged a walkout in December, demanding higher pay and better working conditions. The Teamsters union pledged to make organizing Amazon a priority. And workers at two warehouses in Staten Island, New York, and one in Bessemer, Alabama, are set to vote soon on forming a union.

Workers at an REI store in New York voted to unionize Wednesday and workers at three Starbucks stores have voted to unionize since December.

The Amazon Fresh store in the Central District has 150 employees.

Fink maintains that the Amazon Fresh group has been a union "all along" but it got more organized after a National Labor Relations Board ruling in December required Amazon to post notices to employees about their right to unionize and protection from retaliation.

After getting that notice, Fink went into work before a shift and posted

union flyers, marking an official notice to management that the workers at that Amazon Fresh store saw themselves as a union.

"We need to do this now. We're going to have an election in Bessemer. They have violated our rights. Starbucks is pushing. REI is pushing. This is something we need to push on now because the conversation's going on already," they said.

From Amazon's point of view, "employees have the choice of whether or not to join a union, and they haven't chosen to do that at this store," said spokesperson Maria Boschetti. "Our focus remains on working directly with our team to make Amazon a great place to work."

Amazon Workers United decided not to go the traditional unionization route, which requires filing a petition, with support from at least 30% of employees, and holding an election, with support from a majority of voters, according to the NLRB.

The Amazon Fresh union took a different organizing tactic—forming a union on its own—that it said would move the process along faster and still protect workers.

The workers would be protected if Amazon retaliated against them for union activity, according to Sarah Ryan, a professor emeritus at The Evergreen State College in Olympia who studies labor and industrial relations

If retaliation were to happen, the NLRB could order Amazon to reinstate the workers if it found they were unfairly fired. But the penalty doesn't do much beyond that, Ryan said. It would require Amazon to pay the workers wages they had missed—minus anything the workers made if they got a new job in the meantime—and put up posters saying they wouldn't do it again.

In the labor relations world, some people call it "the wallpaper cure."

A union strategy like Amazon Workers United's relies on strong support from the workforce and the community, in the hopes it will push the company to react and make changes in response to the [worker's](#) demands, Ryan said.

"The theory is you act like a union, you display unity, you take care of each other, you represent each other, and you try to win concessions even if you don't have an electoral majority by the NLRB," she said. "It's pioneering, and if it works for them, they'll be making a real contribution."

In March, the union sent a list of demands to management, including a \$25 minimum starting wage, a change to the company's attendance policy, chairs for cashiers, the right to wear Black Lives Matter pins to work and the implementation of more training to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace.

And it put a deadline on its efforts: If it didn't receive a "reasonable response" from management in 60 days, it would strike.

Since Amazon Workers United doesn't look like most unions, its strike, if it comes, also won't look like most strikes.

It might not have a picket line that workers and customers are encouraged not to cross, and it might not even include a walkout. A 10-minute strike would be considered a success, Fink said.

Since organizing, Amazon Workers United said the company has already pushed back.

Fink filed charges with the NLRB against the company in February,

alleging management threatened to "escalate further discipline" if they continued organizing efforts.

Fink had arrived early to a shift to distribute flyers and information about the store's union, before clocking in on time, according to the complaint. After a lunch break, they said management approached them and "disciplined me for sharing union information with my co-workers." They were told it was their first warning.

The [union](#) filed more charges against Amazon with the NLRB in March as well as charges with the Seattle Office for Civil Rights and Seattle's Office of Labor Standards.

On Thursday, Amazon Workers United filed a third charge with the NLRB, alleging Amazon's decision to publicly announce the closure of several retail locations was in "direct retaliation to our request for better pay, a safer work environment and an end to the sexual harassment," according to legal filings.

Boschetti from Amazon says the "allegations in the charges filed at the NLRB are false and we look forward to showing that through this process."

And the closures aren't a move away from retail, according to spokesperson Betsy Harden.

Rather, closing its bookstores, 4-star stores—where customers can buy electronics, toys and home goods—and its Pop Up ventures allows the company to focus more on its grocery options, including Amazon Fresh, Amazon Go and Whole Foods Markets, Harden said.

Walking down the aisles of the Amazon Fresh in the Central District, Fink, who has worked in grocery stores since a first job at Kroger at 16

years old, said it's not hard to hear and see their co-workers' "discontent."

"I think this is part of that process of [Amazon] jumping into the grocery business and not really knowing what they're doing," they said. "I think they had a blind spot in their strategy."

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Citation: A new kind of union is forming at Amazon Fresh stores in Seattle (2022, March 9) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://techxplore.com/news/2022-03-kind-union-amazon-fresh-seattle.html>

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