

Labor groups close in on Amazon in two tight union elections (Update)

March 31 2022, by Haleluya Hadero and Anne D'innocenzio



Elijah Ramos stands outside the the Amazon fulfillment center in Staten Island borough of New York at a bus stop on March 16, 2022. An independent group formed by former and current Amazon workers are trying to unionize a company warehouse in New York City. If successful, the effort at the Amazon fulfillment center in Staten Island could lead to the first unionized Amazon facility in the U.S. Credit: AP Photo/Haleluya Hadero

Labor organizers always knew it would be tough to convince Amazon workers to unionize. But a surprisingly strong early showing in a New York election and a still-uncertain outcome in an Alabama election are giving them hope.

In Staten Island, New York, 1,518 warehouse workers have so far voted "yes" to forming a union while 1,154 have voted "no," according to an early tally Thursday evening by the National Labor Relations Board, which is overseeing [both elections](#). Ballots continue to be counted Friday morning.

Meanwhile, Amazon workers in Bessemer, Alabama, appear to have rejected a union bid but outstanding challenged ballots could change the outcome. The votes were 993-to-875 against the union. A hearing to review 416 challenged ballots is expected to begin in the next few days.

If a majority of Amazon workers ultimately votes yes in either Staten Island or Bessemer, it would mark the first successful U.S. organizing effort in the company's history. Organizers have faced an uphill battle against the nation's second-largest private employer, which is making every effort to keep unions out.

The union campaigns come at a time of widespread labor unrest at many corporations. Workers at more than 140 Starbucks locations around the country, for instance, have requested union elections and several of them have already been successful.



Michelle Valentin Nieves stand outside the the Amazon fulfillment center in Staten Island borough of New York at a bus stop on March 16, 2022. An independent group formed by former and current Amazon workers are trying to unionize a company warehouse in New York City. If successful, the effort at the Amazon fulfillment center in Staten Island could lead to the first unionized Amazon facility in the U.S. Credit: AP Photo/Haleluya Hadero

John Logan, director of labor and employment studies at San Francisco State University, said the early vote counts in New York have been "shocking." The nascent Amazon Labor Union, which is leading the charge on Staten Island, has no backing from an established union and is powered by former and current warehouse workers.

"I don't think that many people thought that the Amazon Labor Union

had much of a chance of winning at all," Logan said. "And I think we're likely to see more of those (approaches) going forward."

After a crushing defeat last year in Bessemer, when a majority of workers voted against forming a union, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union got a second chance to organize another campaign when the NLRB ordered a do-over after determining that Amazon tainted the first election.



Signs are posted outside the the Amazon fulfillment center in Staten Island borough of New York at a bus stop on March 16, 2022. An independent group formed by former and current Amazon workers are trying to unionize a company warehouse in New York City. If successful, the effort at the Amazon fulfillment center in Staten Island could lead to the first unionized Amazon facility in the

U.S. Credit: AP Photo/Haleluya Hadero

Though RWDSU is currently lagging in the latest election, Logan said the early results were still remarkable because the union has made a good effort narrowing its margin from last year.

Stuart Appelbaum, president of the RWDSU, said on Thursday that the union would be filing objections to how Amazon handled the election in Bessemer but declined to specify. He also took the opportunity to lash out at current labor laws, which he believes are rigged against unions and favor corporations.

"It should not be so difficult to organize a union in the United States," he said.

Chris Smalls, a fired Amazon employee who has been leading the ALU in its fight on Staten Island, remains hopeful of victory.

"To be leading in Day One and be up a couple hundred against a trillion dollar company, this is the best feeling in the world," Smalls said after the conclusion of Thursday's counting.



Signs are posted outside the the Amazon fulfillment center in Staten Island borough of New York at a bus stop on March 16, 2022. An independent group formed by former and current Amazon workers are trying to unionize a company warehouse in New York City. If successful, the effort at the Amazon fulfillment center in Staten Island could lead to the first unionized Amazon facility in the U.S. Credit: AP Photo/Haleluya Hadero

Amazon has pushed back hard in the lead-up to both elections. The retail giant held mandatory meetings, where workers were told unions are a bad idea. The company also launched an anti-union website targeting workers and placed English and Spanish posters across the Staten Island facility urging them to reject the union. 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 a filing released on Thursday, Amazon disclosed it spent about \$4.2 million last year on labor consultants, which organizers say the retailer routinely solicits to persuade workers not to unionize. It's unclear how much it spent on such services in 2022.

Both labor fights faced unique challenges. Alabama, for instance, is a right-to-work state that prohibits a company and a union from signing a contract that requires workers to pay dues to the union that represents them.



Amazon worker Dale Wyatt talks about a drive to unionize the company's fulfillment center in Bessemer, Ala., during an interview in Birmingham, Ala., on Thursday, March 10, 2022. Workers are voting for a second time on a labor push at the warehouse after the National Labor Relations Board ordered a do-over election upon determining that Amazon unfairly influenced an initial vote in 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Jay Reeves

The union landscape in Alabama is also 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 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. That's more than double the national average of 10.3%. In Alabama, it's 5.9%.

The mostly Black workforce at the Amazon facility, which opened in 2020, mirrors the Bessemer population of more than 70% Black residents, according to the latest U.S. Census data.

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.



Signs supporting the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union are shown near an Amazon fulfillment center in Bessemer, Ala., on Thursday, March 10, 2022. Workers are voting for a second time on a labor push at the warehouse after the National Labor Relations Board ordered a do-over election upon determining that Amazon unfairly influenced an initial vote in 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Jay Reeves



People arrive for work at the Amazon distribution center in the Staten Island borough of New York, Monday, Oct. 25, 2021. An independent group formed by former and current Amazon workers are trying to unionize a company warehouse in New York City. If successful, the effort at the Amazon fulfillment center in Staten Island could lead to the first unionized Amazon facility in the U.S. Credit: AP Photo/Craig Ruttle, File



Suspended Amazon employee Reyn McGuire talks about her support for a drive to unionize the company's fulfillment center in Bessemer, Ala., during an interview in Birmingham, Ala., on Thursday, March 10, 2022. Workers are voting for a second time on a labor push at the warehouse after the National Labor Relations Board ordered a do-over election upon determining that Amazon unfairly influenced an initial vote in 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Jay Reeves



Suspended Amazon employee Reyn McGuire, right, talks with an unidentified union organizer in Birmingham, Ala., on Thursday, March 10, 2022. Workers are voting for a second time on a labor push at the company's warehouse in Bessemer, Ala., after the National Labor Relations Board ordered a do-over election upon determining that Amazon unfairly influenced an initial vote in 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Jay Reeves



Angelika Maldonado, right, Amazon Labor Union (ALU) chairwoman of workers committee at Staten Island Amazon warehouse, and Brett Daniels, director of organizing for ALU workers committee, watch a zoom-cast of vote counting to unionize Amazon warehouse on Staten Island, N.Y., Thursday March 31, 2022, in New York. Credit: AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews

The ALU said they don't have a demographic breakdown of the warehouse workers on Staten Island and Amazon declined to provide the information to The Associated Press, citing the union vote. 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.

Amazon workers there are seeking longer breaks, paid time off for

injured employees and an hourly wage of \$30, up from a minimum of just over \$18 per hour offered by the company. The estimated average wage for the borough is \$41 per hour, according to a similar U.S. Census Bureau analysis of Staten Island's \$85,381 median household income.

A spokesperson for Amazon said the company invests in wages and benefits, such as health care, 401(k) plans and a prepaid college tuition program to help grow workers' careers.

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

© 2022 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: Labor groups close in on Amazon in two tight union elections (Update) (2022, March 31) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2022-03-vote-amazon-union-elections.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--