

Amazon, union face off in a rematch election in New York

May 2 2022, by Haleluya Hadero



Alexander Campbell, a 25-year-old warehouse worker, stands by Amazon's LDJ5 warehouse in the Staten Island borough of New York on Friday, April 29, 2022. The National Labor Relations Board will count votes Monday in the second union election among Amazon workers on Staten Island, New York, a rematch for the retailer and the nascent group of worker organizers right on the heels of their historic labor victory. Campbell voted against the union, saying he

read some things online that convinced him his wages might go down if the warehouse unionized. Credit: AP Photo/Haleluya Hadero

Amazon and the nascent group that successfully organized the company's first-ever U.S. union are headed for a rematch Monday, when a federal labor board will tally votes cast by warehouse workers in yet another election on Staten Island.

A second labor win could give workers in other Amazon facilities—and at other companies—the motivation they need to launch similar efforts. It could also cement the power and influence of the Amazon Labor Union, the grassroots group of former and current workers that secured [last month's historic victory](#).

But a [union](#) loss could mute some of the labor celebration and raise questions about whether the first victory was just a fluke.

The results of the election are expected to be announced early Monday evening by the National Labor Relations Board, which is overseeing the process. Meanwhile, the agency must still decide whether to certify the first win, which has been disputed by Amazon.

There are far fewer workers eligible to vote in this latest election versus last month's—about 1,500 compared with 8,300 at the neighboring Staten Island facility. There are fewer organizers, too—roughly 10 compared with roughly 30.

"It's a much more personal, aggressive fight over here," said Connor Spence, an Amazon employee who works as the union's vice president of membership.

Spence said there was more support for the organizing efforts earlier this year when the ALU filed for an election. But that was quickly overshadowed by the bigger facility across the street, where organizers were directing more of their energy.

Meanwhile, Amazon continued holding mandatory meetings to persuade its workers to reject the union effort, posting anti-union flyers and launching a website urging workers to "vote NO."

Amazon spokesperson Kelly Nantel said in a statement that it is up to employees whether or not they want to join a union. But "as a company, we don't think unions are the best answer for our employees," Nantel said. "Our focus remains on working directly with our team to continue making Amazon a great place to work."

Experts say the scrappy union is disadvantaged by the low number of organizers but that might not spell trouble since the ALU's legitimacy has been bolstered by last month's unexpected win. It has also gotten support from top union leaders and high-profile progressive lawmakers. At a rally held outside the warehouse a day before voting began last week, U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez spoke in support of organizers spearheading the union drive.

"This is certainly about ALU, but it's also about the broader desire for organizing right now," said Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants, who also attended the rally. "And we have to run as fast as we possibly can in this environment to organize millions of people if we're going to change the power structure in this country and actually give working people a fair shot."



Christian Smalls, president of the Amazon Labor Union, speaks at a rally outside an Amazon facility on Staten Island in New York, Sunday, April 24, 2022. Amazon and the nascent group that successfully organized the company's first-ever U.S. union are headed for a rematch Monday, May 2, 2022, when a federal labor board will tally votes cast by warehouse workers in yet another election on Staten Island. Credit: AP Photo/Seth Wenig, File

After their first Staten Island win, ALU organizers reoriented their attention to the smaller warehouse and reiterated their vision to workers—longer breaks, better job protection and a higher hourly wage of \$30, up from the minimum of just over \$18 currently offered on Staten Island.

Spence said they also tailored their pitch to part-time workers, whom the

facility depends on heavily and who have been waiting on their requests to transfer to [full-time work](#) at the company. By the time votes were cast, he believed the union had regained its momentum.

"We had to claw it back," he said.

Even with one victory under its belt, progress has been slow for the ALU. Last month, Amazon filed objections over the successful union drive, arguing in a filing with the NLRB that the vote was tainted by organizers and by the board's regional office in Brooklyn that oversaw the election. The company says it wants a redo election, but pro-union experts believe it's an effort to delay contract negotiations and potentially blunt some of the organizing momentum.

Despite the setbacks, the ALU has realized progress in other ways, shining a spotlight on Amazon's anti-union tactics as well as highlighting concerns about its workplace conditions. That in turn has rallied others into taking action.

On Tuesday, Sanders sent a letter to President Joe Biden asking him to sign an executive order that cuts off Amazon's contracts with the government until the retailer stops what Sanders calls its "illegal anti-union activity." Organizers believe such a move would fulfill the president's campaign promise to "ensure federal contracts only go to employers who sign neutrality agreements committing not to run anti-union campaigns."

In New York, two state lawmakers introduced a bill to regulate warehouse productivity quotas, aiming to curtail workplace injuries at facilities operated by Amazon and other companies. The bill's sponsors said they were motivated by ALU's impending contract negotiations with the company, which has been criticized for its high [warehouse injury rates](#).

Separately, the ALU, along with American Federation of Teachers and New York State United Teachers, is calling on New York Attorney General Letitia James to investigate Amazon's eligibility for tax credits under a state program designed to draw business to New York. In a letter sent to James, Seth Goldstein, a union attorney who offers pro-bono legal help to the ALU, contends Amazon has committed "flagrant unfair labor practices" during the union drives that violated the worker protector provisions of the program. A spokesperson for Amazon declined to comment.

Back on Staten Island, some workers at the warehouse voted against unionizing, saying they already feel taken care of by the company and would rather wait and see how the [contract negotiations](#) go at the other facility before they join the union effort. There's also doubts the ALU can accomplish what it sets out to do.

Alexander Campbell, a 25-year-old warehouse [worker](#), voted against the union, saying he read some things online that convinced him his wages might go down if the warehouse unionized.

But others are lending their support. Michael Aguilar, a part-time warehouse employee turned ALU organizer, said he put in a request with Amazon about two months ago to switch to full-time work. He says that request hasn't been granted but the company continues to bring in new hires. When one of the organizers invited him to a union-organizing call, he attended and eventually decided to join the union drive.

"Everything they were fighting for aligned with everything I experienced," he said. "Once I found that out, I jumped on board."

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