

Amazon defeats union push in Alabama, but labor leaders say the fight's not over

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Amazon scored a resounding victory Friday in a union vote at its Bessemer, Alabama, warehouse, the most high-profile organizing drive in the commerce giant's history.

But labor leaders, including several in the Seattle area, said they aren't done fighting to organize Amazon workers.

The election attracted nationwide attention because of the rarity of unionization attempts at Amazon, as well as the scale of the effort in Alabama—nearly 6,000 employees work at the Bessemer fulfillment center. The [union](#) push at Bessemer marked the first time that workers have tried to unionize a U.S. Amazon facility since a failed 2014 effort in Delaware. Union leaders portrayed the push as, in part, a fight for racial equity. People of color in Amazon's workforce tend to work lower-paid, more dangerous warehouse jobs.

Though not every vote was counted, more than half of the 3,041 Bessemer workers who voted in the election to decide whether to form a union cast a "no" vote and Amazon's margin of victory

exceeded the number of challenged ballots. The final preliminary tally was 1,798 votes against unionizing versus 738 votes in favor of the union, according to the National Labor Relations Board.

Despite the lopsided vote count, Nicole Grant, executive secretary-treasurer for the Seattle-based Martin Luther King, Jr. County Labor Council, said she's optimistic workers will keep trying to unionize Amazon facilities in the future.

"When you get smacked down by an employer, it's stunning," Grant said. "It makes people retreat and feel fear. But what it doesn't do is change anything. All the issues that have pushed people to want more power in their workplace in Bessemer at Amazon and in Seattle at Amazon, those things are still there."

The months-long union fight in Alabama galvanized Amazon workers and labor groups around the country, prompting a surge in interest in union organizing at other Amazon facilities.

"This organizing inspired a nation," said Faye Guenther, the president of UFCW 21, the union representing Seattle-area grocery and warehouse workers. To her, Amazon's victory shows "what workers face when they try to organize. They face an impossible gauntlet of anti-union tactics. And this exposed that."

In a blog post Friday, Amazon objected to claims that it intimidated workers. "Our employees heard far more anti-Amazon messages from the union, policymakers, and media outlets than they heard from us. And Amazon didn't win—our employees made the choice to vote against joining a union," the company wrote.

Amazon forced employees to attend mandatory lectures about the perils of unionization, launched a website warning workers that paying union dues could make it harder to feed their families, and

changed the timing of traffic lights outside the warehouse to make it harder for union organizers to canvass workers. The company also pressed the U.S. Postal Service to install a mailbox to collect ballots at the warehouse just before the start of the mail-in voting period, a move union officials said was intended to intimidate workers. Amazon has said the mailbox's placement was intended to make voting easier for workers.

As soon as the vote count in Alabama neared 1,600 "no" votes, union officials charged that Amazon illegally interfered in the voting process. The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), which represented Amazon workers seeking to unionize at the Bessemer facility, said it will file an objection to Amazon's conduct in the election with the National Labor Relations Board, an appeals process that could take additional weeks or months to conclude.

"Amazon has left no stone unturned in its efforts to gaslight its own employees," RWDSU president Stuart Appelbaum said in a statement. "We won't let Amazon's lies, deception and illegal activities go unchallenged. ... We demand a comprehensive investigation over Amazon's behavior in corrupting this election."

Labor leaders have emphasized that workers deserve a more even playing field when they're attempting to organize, something they say a bill being debated in Congress, the PRO Act, could create.

The PRO Act, which passed the House in February but faces an uphill battle in the Senate, would make it easier for workers to organize and add penalties for employers who seek to thwart unionization attempts.

"Any [worker](#) that has a sense of what's at risk feels those threats," said Larry Brown, the president of the Washington State Labor Council, referring to the threat of retaliation from an employer. "Those threats are real. That's why we need the PRO Act."

At an Amazon-sponsored news conference after the voting results were announced, four Amazon employees at the Bessemer facility said their

colleagues who supported unionization did not understand what was at stake.

"This is a victory for the employees," said Will Stokes, one of the Amazon workers at the news conference. "We can get the same goals accomplished without the union. We're not against unions; we just feel that at this facility, at this company, we don't need a union."

Mimi Harris, the outgoing co-chair of the Seattle Democratic Socialists of America and a former Amazon warehouse employee, said she believed the Bessemer union push "planted a seed for a drive that will continue across the country." Harris has led solidarity marches with the unionizing Bessemer workers in recent months.

"Of course I'm disappointed," she said. "But it's really important to recognize that the Bessemer workers were going up against a company that spent millions of dollars on one of the most aggressive union-busting campaigns we've ever seen."

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