

After union vote, Bezos vows to do better for Amazon workers

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In this Sept. 19, 2019, file photo, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos speaks during his news conference at the National Press Club in Washington. After a union battle at an Alabama warehouse, Bezos vowed Thursday, April 15, 2021 to focus on making Amazon a better and safer place to work. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais, File)

After a union battle at an Alabama warehouse, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos acknowledged that Amazon has to do better for its workers and vowed to make Amazon a safer place to work.

Bezos made the promise Thursday in his annual [letter to shareholders](#). He said he didn't take comfort in the outcome of the recent union election in Bessemer, Alabama, even though workers there overwhelmingly rejected a union.

"I think we need to do a better job for our employees," said Bezos, who will be stepping down as CEO later this year and will become executive chair of the online shopping giant.

Amazon's treatment of workers has been in the spotlight during the pandemic. While coronavirus was raging, warehouse workers had to pack orders as Amazon sales soared.

The New York attorney general is suing Amazon for not doing enough to protect workers against the virus at two facilities in the city. And earlier this month, the company vowed to improve working conditions after acknowledging that some delivery drivers might have had to urinate in bottles to deliver packages on time, an allegation the company previously denied.

The letter from Bezos comes a week after workers in Alabama voted against forming a union, cutting off a path that labor activists had hoped would lead to similar efforts throughout the company.

Workers who were seeking a union said they spent 10-hour days on their feet packing packages and unloading boxes, with only two 30-minute breaks and not enough time to eat lunch, go to the bathroom or recover from the back-breaking work.

Bezos disputed the portrayal of Amazon workers and how they are treated.

"If you read some of the news reports, you might think we have no care for employees. In those reports, our employees are sometimes accused of being desperate souls and treated as robots," Bezos wrote. "That's not accurate. They're sophisticated and thoughtful people who have options for where to work."

Bezos said part of his focus as chair will be to make warehouse jobs safer. He said about 40% of injuries are sprains and strains caused by repeating the same motions and are more likely to happen during a [worker](#)'s first six months in the job. He said training may help those "working in a physical role for the first time." And he said the company is deploying technology this year that will change up a worker's job so they're not using the same muscles over and over again.

Stuart Appelbaum, president of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, which organized workers at Bessemer, said Thursday that the letter from Bezos proves what it had been saying about poor conditions at Amazon's warehouses.

"Workers need a [union](#)—not just another Amazon public relations effort in damage control," Appelbaum said.

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