

Amazon faces rising union push in United States

23 March 2022, by Juliette Michel



Christian Smalls (C) speaks before attendees at an Amazon Labor Union event in New York city on March 11, 2022.

Christian Smalls no longer works at Amazon's JFK8 warehouse in New York, but he still sees former colleagues every day at the bus stop as they head into work.

His mission: To convince the [workers](#) to form a [union](#).

The e-commerce behemoth, one of the biggest employers in the United States, so far has kept itself union-free in its home market.

But Amazon faces imminent votes at three US facilities that could establish a union toehold, something labor experts think could spur on campaigns at other venues.

At JFK8, in the city's Staten Island borough, 5,000 workers will be able to cast their ballots on the union bid from March 25 to 30, and the counting is scheduled to commence on March 31.

A vote at a second Staten Island venue, a sorting

center employing 1,500 people, is scheduled to begin April 25.

In the southern state of Alabama, more than 6,000 workers at a warehouse in Bessemer have another opportunity to form a union. They have until March 25 to vote by mail, and the counting there will start March 28 and could take up to two weeks.

A large majority of workers at the Bessemer facility last year voted against unionizing, but US labor officials overseeing the process threw out the result, citing "interference" by Amazon.

Need for change

Smalls, 33, was fired in March 2020 just after organizing a protest for [personal protective equipment](#) amid the surge of the first major Covid-19 outbreak in New York.

Rather than go away quietly, Smalls spoke out about his experience and continued to clamor for more support for essential workers.

Shortly after the first vote in Bessemer, Smalls together with current and former Amazon workers created the Amazon Labor Union.

"I know I am on the right side of this fight," Smalls told AFP earlier this month during a phone-banking event at which about 20 volunteers gathered to call employees one-by-one in order to tout the potential of a union to boost wages, working conditions, benefits and [job security](#).

Isaiah Thomas, 20, who is working at Bessemer in order to finance his studies, is using essentially the same arguments to convince his fellow Amazon workers.



A speaker stands before a screen during an Amazon Labor Union 'phonebanking' event in New York city on March 11, 2022.

After last year's setback, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, which backs the Alabama campaign, has redoubled its efforts to speak with workers, going door-to-door and during breaks.

"The moment that I stepped through the doors on my first day on the job, I realized that we needed to have change at Amazon," said Thomas, who pointed to safety hazards, unreasonable workloads over a long day and limited break times.

Thomas joined the effort following outreach from union supporters.

Before then, "I didn't really know how a union operated," he said.

Uphill fight

Amazon has adopted a similar approach in both New York and Alabama, discouraging the workers from supporting unions at mandatory meetings, and through signs and other literature at the [work site](#).

The company argues that forming a union will mar the company's direct relationship with workers and represent a jump into the unknown, with no guarantee workers will wind up with better wages or job security.

"Our employees have the choice of whether or not to join a union," said Amazon spokesperson Kelly Nantel. "As a company, we don't think unions are the best answer for our employees."

"Our focus remains on working directly with our team to continue making Amazon a great place to work."

Nantel touted company benefits that include health care and financing college tuition after three months of work. The company also pays competitively, including at Bessemer, where the \$15.80 an-hour floor is more than twice the federal minimum wage.

Ruth Milkman, a sociologist of labor movements at City University of New York, said US labor law stacks the odds in favor of the company, so a union win would be significant.

"If either of these campaigns at Amazon were to be successful, it would be huge and that would be very inspiring to other people working at Amazon," Milkman said.

However, "I'm not optimistic," she said, noting that the New York campaign is not affiliated with an established union that could commit [financial resources](#) to support the effort to organize.

In Bessemer, meanwhile, workers have few alternatives in terms of jobs that pay as well as Amazon.

"You can be intimidated by employer propaganda," Milkman said, adding that workers will "think twice" about rocking the boat.

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