

A union drive is underway at Amazon's huge new North Carolina facility. Can workers win?

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The Amazon distribution center in Garner, North Carolina, is massive. Located a few miles southeast of downtown Raleigh, it covers 2 million square feet and houses multiple departments across four floors. The facility, known as RDU1, employs more than 4,000 people who work shifts spanning all hours of the day and night, seven days a week.

It's a colossal operation, and Mary Hill is one of the [workers](#) trying to unionize it all.

A Raleigh resident, Hill is the co-founder of Carolina Amazonians United for Solidarity and Empowerment, or C.A.U.S.E., which she formed with her colleague Rev. Ryan Brown, a former pastor in western North Carolina.

Their desire to unionize began in January, when Brown, 41, says management asked him to work in an area he knew was experiencing COVID-19 spread. He later shared his frustrations with Hill,

who agreed with his plan to take action.

"It was time to take a stand," Hill said. "To stop the unfair treatment of associates, the way they talk to us, the lack of respect."

Hill, 68, works in the pack singles department at \$15.50 an hour. She spends 10.5-hour shifts packaging "anything that anybody orders," which on a recent day included a cast-iron pot, a Ring doorbell, and lots of batteries.

C.A.U.S.E. remains in the early stages of organizing, and it has a long road ahead.

Hill and Brown have built a coalition of pro-[union](#) workers, most of whom are Black and Latino, like the workforce as a whole. But the support isn't yet large enough to win an election. To reach that point, C.A.U.S.E. must convince skeptical coworkers, overcome opposition from Amazon, and learn to lead a grassroots campaign in a state that lacks strong structural and historical foundations for organizing.

Many factors are working against the group, but Hill believes their mission is too important not to try.

'Someone who's been in the trenches'

In April, Amazon warehouse workers in Staten Island, New York, voted to form the first union at the company.

Organizing the 8,000-worker facility called JFK8 was a landmark win for the labor movement, which has seen immense potential in unionizing throughout the nation's second-largest private employer. But this major victory has come with a string of losses. Last year, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union fell short in its effort to

organize a facility in Bessemer, Alabama, and this spring, the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) lost another election at a second Staten Island facility.

Other ALU campaigns have sputtered before reaching elections, leaving some questioning the union's leadership.

For now, C.A.U.S.E. is not seeking to join another union, though it shares developments and advice with ALU leaders on biweekly conference calls. The North Carolina group is focused on gaining enough support for an election, which C.A.U.S.E. treasurer Tim Platt believes will arrive in 2023.

To call an election, unions must get at least 30% of workers to sign union authorization cards within a year. Labor experts note unions almost always want to obtain cards from 50% of the workforce before asking the National Labor Relations Board for an election because support from a majority of voters will be needed to win.

C.A.U.S.E. isn't ready to collect union cards. The union is currently passing around petitions to gauge interest and sign up members. So far, it has gathered around 700 signatures, or about 15% of the workforce, said Platt, who works at the Amazon RDU5 sorting center in Durham. He said the union is "planting the seeds" for future action at RDU5, but current mobilization is centered on the Garner facility.

But progress has been gradual, organizers say, in part because of RDU1's high worker turnover rate and its sheer size.

"It has so many departments, so many different shifts, people speaking different languages," Hill said. "It's never closed: 24/7/365. It just takes a little time, a little maneuvering to get the word out through the vastness of the place."

C.A.U.S.E. has held routine flier events to connect with coworkers, using the face-to-face opportunities to share what they believe their union can deliver: higher pay, more generous sick leave, safer conditions and a voice at the collective bargaining table.

Hill said many workers don't understand what a union does.

"We need a working committee, a body of us," she will explain. "Someone who's been in the trenches with us making changes that directly impact our livelihoods and our families."

Hostile state for labor

North Carolina is perennially ranked among the least friendly, if not the least friendly, states for unions. While organized labor made headway in Northern factories in the 20th century, their efforts wilted in the fiercely anti-union tobacco and textile industries.

This resistance can be seen in the 1979 movie "Norma Rae," based on a real-life union organizer at a textile mill in the North Carolina city of Roanoke Rapids.

Much of unionizing is rooted in tradition, an act passed down from parents to children. North Carolina, like much of the South, lacks this legacy.

Last year, 2.6% of North Carolina workers belonged to unions, compared to 10.3% in all of the United States. The only state with a lower rate was South Carolina.

While Starbucks unions have scored consistent wins in high-profile campaigns across the country this year, employees of the coffee chain in North Carolina have only successfully unionized in one out of four elections. (Workers at a fifth store in Wilmington will have their mail-in votes tallied later this month.)

North Carolina is one of 27 right-to-work states, which means employees aren't required to join a union or pay union dues even when a union represents their workforce. This can financially strain unions and deter deeper investments. For example, while unions received dues from 2.6% of North Carolina workers last year, they represented 3.4% of workers.

But the profile of organized labor in the state is growing, said Dan Bowling, who teaches labor and

employment law at the Duke University School of Law.

"There was a time when no one under the age of 50 knew what a union was," he said. "Now that has changed. And it's with Amazon, so unions are back in the headlines."

With tobacco and textiles no longer the major economic engines of the state, Bowling foresees young, well-educated professionals, especially in tech industries, being open to unions.

"I think it's inevitable there will be a shift," he said. "We're going to see an increase in activity. We might never be New Jersey but I think there's now a large potential for growth in North Carolina."

'We don't think unions are the best answer'

Amazon doesn't want their facilities to unionize.

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

Like Starbucks, Amazon has taken strict measures to ward off unions. The company hires anti-union consulting firms to steer its messaging, and requires workers to sit through anti-union classes.

"Like many other companies, we hold these meetings because it's important that everyone understands the facts about joining a union and the election process itself," Flanigan said.

Last month, Amazon announced the company would bar off-duty workers from the facilities, a move seen as an attempt to undercut grassroots organizing.

"They're dialed to 11," Elon Law professor Eric Fink said of the company's anti-union efforts. "They are super, super aggressive."

C.A.U.S.E. leaders say they will be undeterred by Amazon's approach, even if the real battle hasn't

yet begun.

"Once you go into that campaign phase, even though (Amazon) has done some busting already, it really ramps up," Platt said. "They have a huge war chest, which doesn't faze us at all. We recognize how good we are organizationally."

Even if his group doesn't have union cards signed from 50% of the workforce, Platt believes getting the campaign formally started will help C.A.U.S.E build momentum needed to achieve a massive labor victory in a state that's seen few.

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