

USA: Support Bessemer workers - and imitate them

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A labour organising drive in the town of Bessemer, Alabama, (population 26,680) has caught the attention of trade unionists and socialists worldwide. The reason? Workers, union organisers and community activities there have taken on a veritable Goliath of modern capitalism ? Jeff Bezos? Amazon, the second largest retailer, behind Walmart, in the USA, where it still does 60% of its business.

Amazon is now a global company which, thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic, has seen its global sales, workforce and profits rocket. In 2020, in Germany, sales rose 9.8%, totalling \$34.88 billion (€31.15 billion); in the UK, 15.2%, totalling \$29.05 billion (£22.76 billion); and in Japan 12.3%, totalling \$26.47 billion (JPY2.885 trillion).

According to Forbes, it delivered a truly record performance in 2020 with annual revenue up 38% to \$386 billion, a yearly increase of over \$100 billion, \$125 billion in in the fourth quarter alone. Net profits were up 84% for the year compared to last. Bezos, Amazon?s founder and until recently its CEO, has a personal fortune of \$196 billion. According to the US think tank, the Institute for Policy Studies, during the first six months of the pandemic alone, the country?s 643 billionaires, the likes of Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, saw wealth gains of \$845bn, raising their collective score from \$2.95tn to \$3.8tn.

To realise such stupendous profits, Amazon added more than 425,000 workers worldwide between January and October last year. Forbes estimates that Amazon now has 1.2 million employees (810,000 in the USA), not counting half a million delivery drivers who are not direct employees of the company. The pandemic has been a godsend not just for the exponential growth of online sales but also for freeing up a huge potential youthful and skilled workforce, one being ?let go? by other companies hit by the lockdowns.

Yet Bezos treats his workers just like the industrial ?robber barons? of the nineteenth century; Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie, Rockefeller, with expensive union busting firms and lawyers brought in to campaign against unions. Workers at Bessemer, and at every Amazon warehouse and fulfilment centre, face long workdays (ten hours). Overtime is mandatory, and workers are often told just hours before it begins, often ending at unsocial hours when transport home is scarce.

Then there is the heavy lifting, speedup, and aggressive tracking of employees to cut down time for lunch or for toilet breaks. Hospitalisations are more common than at other logistics firms. Also, numbers have fainted due to lack of air conditioning. In the first wave of the pandemic, there was also a widespread absence of personal protective equipment (PPE). Above all, workers can be fired at will for any reason.

Pay, at \$15.3, is usually higher than the average in surrounding areas but lower than the going rates at warehouses or for delivery drivers. As a result, workers in these sectors fear the downward pressure on their wages from the arrival of Amazon in their area.

Unsurprisingly, Amazon is, like many big US corporations, a fiercely anti-union operation. Its only unionised facilities are in Germany, thanks to legal protection of organising. In the USA, it has repeatedly, and illegally, fired workers for union activity, like Christian Smalls, who led a walkout at the company's warehouse at Staten Island, New York. John Hopkins, a worker at the company's facility in San Leandro, California, was sacked for passing out union flyers on May 1 about their plans for Juneteenth, an annual celebration of the Liberation of the slaves. Incidentally, Jeff Bezos urged his workers to ignore it because the slaves had been liberated 150 years ago. Plainly his wage slaves could not be liberated even for one day.

Facing off against this capitalist giant stands a modern 'boy David', the 2,000 of the 5,800 workers at Amazon's BHM1 Fulfilment Centre in Bessemer who have already signed union authorisation cards and won the right from the National Labor Relations Board to a ballot for union recognition, which will close on 30 March. Amazon has done all it could to impede this process, obliging employees to attend anti-union meetings, trying to stop balloting by mail, plastering the plant with anti-union posters, trying to prevent union organisers speaking to workers on buses as they come into work.

Supporting the pro-union workers in the plant are the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union (60,000 members nationwide in 2014) and many community activists from Bessemer, from nearby Birmingham and volunteers from other cities and states.

Bessemer has a fine union and working class political tradition dating back to the steel, iron ore, coal and textile strikes and organising of the 1930s. The town was also the centre of Communist Party organising amongst sharecroppers. The party there had over a thousand members in the 1930s. But this was largely broken by the massive closures of these industries in the 1980s. Now, the labour tradition is being rebuilt.

Another fine tradition being looked back to is the Birmingham campaign in 1963 by Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement. The Bessemer Fulfilment Centre's workforce is 85% African American, as are 70% of Bessemer's citizens. The RWDSU has linked up with the Black Lives Matter movement with the union's president, Stuart Appelbaum, saying, 'We see this campaign as much as a civil rights struggle as a labour struggle'.

Clearly, a victory for organising in Bessemer will have an encouraging effect across the States and beyond, to Amazon workers in Spain, Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom and Japan. Last year, there was already action over health and safety conditions at the European plants. The organisation of community support in Bessemer is also something to spread, drawing in the racially and gender oppressed as well as youth and students.

Amazon's massive use of high tech systems, combined with its anti-union policies, could be copied throughout the so-called gig economy. Workers will have to develop much more flexible and international networks for solidarity. Old divisions between crafts, as well as union rivalries and the bureaucratic stifling of rank and file workers' initiatives, have stopped unions keeping up with changes in industries and services, old and new. If they continue, they could prove fatal for the new movement. In the end, militant action and speedy support from other workers and their communities will be the leading force in enabling the Davids, like the Bessemer Amazon workers, to bring down the Goliaths.

Beyond the individual unionising battles in the workplaces and companies, workers need to look to the arena of politics, not so much the futile attempts to get the country's second capitalist party to do something for them after decades of pocketing labour contributions for next to nothing in return. The same applies, by the way, to the Black Lives Matter and the women's movement.

Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Ilhan Omar have drafted a bill for Congress which would make the billionaires pay a windfall tax of 60% on the increases they have pocketed during the pandemic. Elementary tax justice it might seem, since it has been calculated that Jeff Bezos could give every Amazon employee \$105,000 and still be as rich as he was before the pandemic.

Of course, the millionaire Republicans and Democrats in Congress will certainly not stomach this. They have just refused to countenance Biden's stimulus package raising the minimum hourly wage from \$7.25 to \$15.

The proposed Protect the Right to Organise Act, PRO, would restore the ability to unionise to millions of workers and level the legal playing field more than any labour legislation in the past 50 years, may soon meet the same fate. Conservative Democrats and Republicans plan a filibuster to kill it off, despite Biden's support for some key elements of the act.

The politics that US workers need cannot start from electioneering and electoral priorities. They must start from a political labour movement with a party adopting as part of its goals the fight for laws that give workers the right to join a union, which heavily penalise employers for sacking workers who organise or strike for better wages and conditions and against racist or sexist discrimination. A reviving union movement, linking up with local union councils, chapters of the rapidly growing Democratic Socialists of America, and communities of the oppressed, needs to set itself the goal of building a workers' party in the USA with a programme for a transition to socialism via a social revolution.

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