

Social context

Amazon A–Z: Labor Unions

“I don’t think we made the decision to be anti-union, we just feel that all the things that unions would want to get us to do, we’ve already done,” said Jeff Wilke, then one of Jeff Bezos’ two deputies, in a 2020 interview with PBS television. He was echoed by one of the company’s spokeswomen, Rachael Lighty, quoted by CNBC: “We already offer what unions are asking for, which is the highest pay in the industry, great benefits, and a safe and innovative workplace.” However, it’s hard to understand how company officials know what unions are asking for when they are still not officially recognised in Amazon’s U.S. fulfillment centers and offices.

For years, the media has reported not only on the difficult working conditions in the corporation’s logistics centers, but also on attempts to unionize among the workforce. “Time” magazine in 2014 covered the case of a group of tech workers at a warehouse in Middletown, Delaware, seeking to join the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers union. According to the magazine, Amazon hired a special consulting firm and held meetings with the workers, discouraging them from voting “yes” in the referendum. After the vote was decided in the company’s favor, an Amazon representative wrote in an email to “Time”:

“With today’s vote against third-party representation, our employees have made it clear that they prefer a direct connection with Amazon,” Mary Osako, an Amazon spokeswoman, wrote in an e-mail. “This direct connection is the most effective way to understand and respond to the wants and needs of our employees. Amazon’s culture and business model are based on rapid innovation, flexibility and open lines of direct communication between managers and associates.”

Corissa Lueken, senior operations manager at a warehouse in Shakopee, Minnesota, where a group of workers protested in 2019, speaks similarly, as quoted by CNBC:

“I like the direct communication with my team. I think this is why we’re so successful is we can we can pivot. We need to make sure that we’re always keeping a focus on our customers — both

internally and externally as well. And I don't think that really works with our union kind of environment, but that's just my personal opinion."

Private or not, however, that opinion sounds surprisingly familiar if you look at Amazon's instructional video that leaked to the media in 2018. An animated character standing in a warehouse surrounded by packages and racks explains:

"We do not believe unions are in the best interest of our customers, shareholders, or most importantly, our associates. Our business model is built upon speed, innovation and customer obsession, things that are generally not associated with unions. (...) As we'll explain later in the course, a union severs the direct working relationship between associates and managers, that we value so highly."

This business model, which is so valuable to Amazon, the company is trying to "protect" by any means possible – not least the aforementioned mandatory anti-union rallies for employees. In January 2022, the National Labor Relations Board accused the company of "repeatedly broke the law by threatening, surveilling, and interrogating their Staten Island warehouse workers who are engaged in a union organizing campaign". According to CNN, company officials also allegedly explained to workers that "Union organizing would fail because the Union organizers were 'thugs'." Amazon denies the accusations and intends to prove it through an NLRB investigation. Amazon has also gone to such absurd lengths as forcing local authorities in Bessemer, Alabama, to change the traffic light cycle on a street adjacent to the warehouse – so as to impede a pro-union publicity campaign ahead of the (ultimately union-losing) referendum.

Seeing the difficulties workers face in forming unions, some of them consciously choose to be active in less formal groups such as Amazonians United or the Amazon Labour Union, which came into being as a result of the unrest growing in the company during the pandemic. The former is already active in warehouses in Chicago, Sacramento and New York, and is part of the international group Amazon Workers International, which also includes trade unionists from the Polish Workers' Initiative union. Among other things, AU boasts of its success in winning an increase in the basic hourly wage in January 2022 – from \$15.80 to \$18 – though its demands also include a deeper reorganization

of the work system. The grassroots and independent strategy of fighting for workers' rights without the support of a large, outside union has other reasons. As Vanessa Carrillo of Amazonians United argues, "We're the ones that know how things are inside the warehouse. If someone else steps in as a union rep, we fear that they won't listen to our voices." She adds, "What we're doing, it's union work. We consider ourselves a union whether Amazon recognizes us or not."

For his part, Christian Smalls, one of the founders of the informal Amazon Labour Union (who was fired during the pandemic over the protests), sees still other advantages: "We think we have a better chance of facing Amazon's attacks on trade unionists because it can't use the same arguments [against us] as it does against the big unions." Despite this, however, the ALU wants to formalize itself, but as a union independent of the big organizations. According to media reports, two union referendums are scheduled for March 2022 alone: at several warehouses in Staten Island, New York (where the ALU operates), and in Bessemer, Alabama, where, in the face of Amazon's many abuses, a repeat vote has been ordered by the NLRB.

sources:

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7. David Streitfeld, *How Amazon Crushes Unions*, "The New York Times", 2021