



Republicans Should Support the Amazon Labor Union

Description

USA: Now is the perfect opportunity for the self-described pro-workers American right to put its populist rhetoric into practice.

Another week, another golden chance for populist Republicans to walk the walk of a “working-class party.” Let’s hope they take it.

On Monday, the Amazon Labor Union filed for an election that could eventually secure collective-bargaining rights for 7,000 workers at the retail giant’s four warehouse facilities on Staten Island. The filing came after organizers gathered the 30-percent-of-workforce minimum required under the National Labor Relations Act. For pro-worker GOPers, championing the would-be union’s cause is not only good politics, but a matter of justice.

By now, it shouldn’t be necessary to enumerate the neo-Dickensian horrors of Jeff Bezos’s smiley-package foundries. Yes, Amazon warehouses offer relatively high starting wages (\$15 an hour at Staten Island, even higher at other locations). The problem is what the firm does to its warehouse employees after they sign the dotted line.

Bathroom breaks are short—often too short to permit workers to make it across the vast length of the warehouse and return to their work stations in time. Bezos, whose net worth is approaching \$200 *billion*, offers his workers only a limited amount of “time off-task” and docks their pay for what Amazon calls “time theft.” Often, this forces workers, especially older ones, to relieve themselves in bottles or in dark corners.

A managerial culture of fear is all-pervasive. “Amazon tracks workers’ every movement inside its warehouses,” reports the *New York Times*. Even top performers have been terminated for as little as a single underproductive day. Your bus was late? Fired. You’re having a family crisis that leaves you anxious and distracted? Fired. The relative number of terminated employees might be low. But given the sheer size of Amazon’s total workforce—1.3 million and growing—the absolute numbers are bound to be high. Moreover, even when managers don’t ruthlessly terminate, their explicit aim is to create an atmosphere of generalized terror, according to internal documents reviewed by the *Times*.

Management-by-terror, as well as the general precarious state of workers, goes back to Bezos’s original vision for his company, back when it was a scrappy online retailer of books. As the *Times* has noted, Bezos “believed that an entrenched work force created a ‘march to mediocrity.’” So he set about creating a regime in which workers constantly feel that this could be their last day. Human capital is supposedly most productive when it is dehumanized.

The result: a 150 percent turnover rate pre-pandemic, a figure so high, “executives fear running out of available American workers,” per the *Times*. It’s that turnover rate that motivated Christian Smalls, an ex-employee of Amazon’s JFK8 facility on Staten Island, to launch the unionization drive. As Smalls told local outlet NY1, “If the job was sustainable, they wouldn’t be hiring all the time. That’s the real question that everyone has to ask. Why are they able to do this? It’s because they fire at a rate of 150 percent. So unionizing is job security, and that’s exactly what we need here.”

Amazon fired Smalls in spring 2020, at the height of the pandemic, after he led a protest over safety conditions at JFK8. Smalls shouldn’t have participated in the demonstration, the firm claimed, given his earlier contact with a Covid-positive employee (Covid war as class war, anyone?). An internal company memo described Smalls, who is black, as neither “smart” nor “articulate.” A few months later, Amazon would lead corporate America’s loud backing for Black Lives Matter protests and rioting (wokeism as cover for class war, anyone?).

Since then, Smalls, with help from friends and colleague on the inside, has made the union a near-reality, despite ferocious anti-unionizing activity typical of Amazon, including “confiscating pro-union pamphlets they left in the break room” and “surveilling where [organizers] congregated on a sidewalk,” according to the *Times*. The Amazon Labor Union has filed nine interference complaints with the National Labor Relations Board in response; the board has found that at least three have some merit and is probing the others.

It is notable, too, that Smalls and his comrades are seeking to form an independent union, not connected to any of the national federations. If Big Labor, such as it is today, is often corrupt, woke, and managerialized, the same can’t fairly be said of the ALU, which is as grassroots as labor movements come.

Which brings us to the GOP populists. The last time there was a (failed) Amazon unionization drive, at a facility in Alabama, Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida was the only one of the “new right” lawmakers to publicly support the workers. More need to speak up, not least my friend Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri, who on Election Night 2020 famously declared, “We are a working-class party now. That’s the future.” If that statement is more aspiration than reality today, it needn’t stay that way: Set aside Amazon’s malevolent wokeism; when a company enjoys such a monstrous power advantage over those who toil for it, collective bargaining is the only serious means for creating a measure of balance.

If “working-class conservatism” only remains a *culture-war* slogan, it won’t change a thing for the better.

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