

TIME

'We Not Human At All.' Why the Fight to Unionize an Alabama Amazon Warehouse Could Spur a Labor Union Resurgence

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Darryl Richardson is bone-tired. For a year, he has labored in a sprawling Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, collecting the home office supplies, fleece sweatpants, antibacterial wipes and other pandemic purchases that millions of customers have been adding to their virtual shopping carts since the warehouse opened in March 2020. As a “picker” for the retail giant, it is Richardson’s job to gather the items and put them in a tote where they can be sent for packing and shipping.

It’s monotonous, labor-intensive work and Richardson says it has taken a physical toll on his 51-year-old body. “I go in there and give it all I can give them,” he says. “My hands be achy, my legs be sore, I be too tired when I get off to do anything. Sometimes I don’t even eat. That’s how tired I be.”

But when he’s not working his 10 hour shifts or picking up mandatory overtime hours as a picker, Richardson is taking on a task that is perhaps even more exhausting: challenging the second largest retail organization in the world—whose founder Jeff Bezos is the richest man on the planet—to a unionization battle that started in his small town and has garnered global attention.

It was Richardson, a Black entry-level Amazon employee and father of four who first inquired about unionizing the Bessemer warehouse with the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU) in June 2020 after experiences at work left him feeling dehumanized and disposable. After months of organizing and infighting, he will learn whether he was successful in helping to unionize the first Amazon warehouse in the country after the seven-week voting period ends on March 29. The results of the vote will have ramifications far beyond Richardson’s own work life. If the majority of eligible Alabama warehouse workers vote to be represented by RWDSU, it will mark the largest increase of workers gaining union membership in a National Labor Relations Board election since 1991. The outcome of the vote could spur more workers—at Amazon and elsewhere—to seek bargaining power in an economy that expects more output for wages that have not kept up with inflation, and would signify a revitalization of private-sector union membership that has been in steady decline for decades. If the union vote fails, however, the loss may depress attempts to take on a company as large as Amazon in future labor fights.

Unlike many unionization battles, the central issue at stake for Amazon and its Bessemer workers isn’t just about money. At Amazon’s 130-plus fulfillment centers across the country, workers make at least \$15.30 per hour, plus benefits. The rate is more than twice the federal minimum wage, which is significant in Bessemer, where the median annual income is \$18,000. Instead the fight is fundamentally about control: both over the demands on workers’ time and

efficiency that have turned Amazon into the digital behemoth it is today, and the workers' say in negotiating what they get out of that labor that has fueled Amazon's rise.

The first incident that pushed Richardson to try to unionize, he says, began when disorganization at the plant resulted in him and more than a dozen of his colleagues waiting more than half an hour to be assigned a work station. Within a few days, he says, a superior approached him and asked him to sign a slip confirming that he was unproductive during that waiting period. He remembers telling the supervisor: "You got to write me up for something y'all didn't do? That ain't right. I'm not gonna sign that, because when I came in here, I did my part."

A few weeks later, he says he was again approached by a superior about another period of time in which he was away from his workstation—something Amazon calls "time off task" or "TOT." In this instance, the confrontation was over a trip to the restroom that took him approximately 10 minutes. Amazon says that for an employee to be formally disciplined for too much TOT, they would have had to have been away from their work for significant periods of time on a routine basis outside of several pre-allotted breaks, but Richardson tries not to test his boundaries now. "Sometimes if I have to use the bathroom," he says, "I try to hold it until it is time to go to break."

Amazon says it has every right to monitor employee productivity. "Like most companies, we have performance expectations for every Amazonian—be it corporate employees or fulfillment center associates and we measure actual performance against those expectations," spokesperson Heather Knox said when asked how much TOT an employee would have to accrue before being penalized. "Associate performance is measured and evaluated over a long period of time as we know that a variety of things could impact the ability to meet expectations in any given day or hour." The company declined to comment on these specific allegations on the record.

But for a company like Amazon—which employs roughly 1.3 million people globally, ships millions of packages on any given day, and serves an estimated 126 million U.S. Amazon Prime members—efficiency and productivity aren't just standards it expects employees to meet, but the very essence of its two-day shipping business model.

The performance expectations leave some warehouse workers feeling pressured to work at a breakneck pace or be replaced by a person or machine that can, especially as the company rolls out faster and faster shipping speeds. "I think that one of the things that is clear about this organizing campaign is that the workers' concerns are more than just merely about their hourly salary," says Faiz Shakir, the founder of More Perfect Union, a group that helped persuade the Biden Administration to show support for the Bessemer unionization attempt in a two-minute video that has been viewed at least 2.8 million times. "Given the amount of money that [workers] help produce for Amazon, you could certainly argue that they deserve even more [money], however, the fundamental issue at play is that they are people who are treated like machines, they are not treated as humans, and there is no dignity for their labor."

That's exactly what Richardson says he experiences as an Amazon employee on the ground. "I feel like we a number. We robots. We not human at all. We machines," he says.

As the former union shop steward at a manufacturer for automobile parts, Richardson thinks unionizing could change that. Within days, the country will find out whether he is right.

'I've never worked at a company like Amazon'

This is not the first time that Amazon employees have tried to organize for better working conditions. But they have never succeeded before.

In 2014, a tiny number of technicians and mechanics who maintained order-fulfillment equipment at a distribution center in Middletown, Delaware participated in the first-ever unionization vote at an Amazon warehouse. Unionization failed miserably. Of the 27 workers eligible to cast a ballot, only six voted to be represented by the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW).

Around the same time, a small group of technicians at a plant in Chester, Virginia approached the IAMAW about organizing their facility just south of Richmond. According to [an investigation by the New York Times](#), nearly 20 out of 30 Chester technicians returned union cards indicating interest in being represented by IAMAW, but union support leveled off after Amazon brought in a human resources team to discuss the potential downsides. In 2016, the Amazon plant settled with the National Labor Relations Board over allegations it had surveilled and threatened employees, according to the *Times*. Amazon had to post a notice at the Virginia warehouse indicating the company would not intimidate workers who expressed interest in unionizing, but says it is following labor laws. “We were compliant with the NLRA in 2016 when the union withdrew its petition, and as we committed in our notice to employees at that time, we continue to be compliant today,” says spokesperson Knox.

This time, the organizing attempt is happening in a conservative state in the Deep South, where all states—including Alabama—have “right-to-work” laws that allow workers to opt out of joining unions or paying union dues in their unionized workplaces. These laws, which 27 states have passed, allow for more employee freedom but can make collective bargaining more difficult.

David Madland, a senior fellow at the liberal policy institute Center for American Progress, says these factors make Alabama a surprising place for workers to attempt such a vote. “In the South, the southern power structure has strongly opposed unionization for many, many decades in large part because of the fear of Blacks and whites joining together,” he says. “The fact [that] workers in the South—some of the least powerful—are joining together to potentially stand up to the biggest company, and the richest man in the world, has tremendous significance.”

A confluence of extraordinary circumstances has pushed the sleepy southern town of Bessemer—a city of 27,000 people located 16 miles outside of Birmingham—towards the brink of breaking through these barriers. For one, the COVID-19 pandemic has fueled renewed concerns about safety conditions for retail workers and gig employees across the country. In April, hundreds of Amazon employees nationwide publicly protested over safety claims, including that the company failed to distribute enough face masks, didn’t provide all workers with fully paid sick leave, and wasn’t enforcing temperature checks at warehouses like it had promised.

As of September, nearly 20,000 frontline U.S. workers at Amazon and its subsidiary Whole Foods had tested positive or were at one point presumed positive for the virus, [according to a company blog post](#). During a two-week period between late December and early January, the company reported that 218 of 7,575 employees and contractors who work at the Bessemer warehouse tested positive for the virus. Amazon says it has invested \$11.5 billion to COVID-19

related initiatives in 2020, including more than \$1.2 billion on things like temperature checks, masks, gloves, enhanced cleaning, and employee testing.

The Bessemer plant has only been open for one year, and during that time the country has also had to grapple with racial equity after several unarmed Black Americans were killed by white police officers and vigilantes, resulting in weeks-long racial justice protests last summer. RWDSU organizers think that momentum in the Black Lives Matter movement over police brutality and social justice has motivated warehouse workers at the Bessemer plant—the vast majority of which are Black—to push for dignity and justice in their working conditions, too. “Many of the workers that we were meeting with to begin the campaign came to the meetings wearing Black Lives Matter t-shirts,” says Adam Obernauer, the director of the retail organizing project at RWDSU. “You can’t separate that time and condition and that [Black Lives Matter] movement from this one.” After accounting for differences among union and non-union populations, Black union workers in the U.S. have wages that are 16% higher than their non-union counterparts, according to a 2016 report from the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

But the dire economic circumstances in places like Bessemer give Amazon more power. Even before COVID-19, the poverty rate in Bessemer was 26%, versus the national rate of 11%. Then the pandemic led to 85,000 residents in the surrounding Jefferson County filing unemployment claims between March and August 2020, says Josh Carpenter, the former director of innovation and economic opportunity in Birmingham, which is also part of Jefferson County. This coincided with Amazon moving into town and promising \$15.30 starting wages, which created a lot of leverage for Amazon, says Carpenter. “There’s historical job loss—generational job loss—that created desperation for job creation for everybody involved,” he says. “COVID happens and it supercharges that leverage.”

J.C. Thompson, a 43-year-old process assistant who supervises employees like Richardson, said the \$15 starting salary was a major incentive for him to apply for a job at Amazon. And he says things have only gotten better for him since he started working at the Bessemer plant last April. Within two months of working at the plant, he was promoted. That, combined, with the fact that Amazon offers a shift differential of more than \$2 per hour for certain shifts, makes him wonder what he could gain from union membership. “There are situations where unions work well,” he says, “but I’ve never worked at a company like Amazon that offers what they offer.” The work that his team does is “not rocket science,” he adds. “They are scanning it, putting it in the box, taping it up.”

But for many others, the initial joy of finding a job during an economic lull seemed to wear off quickly as other problems arose. Since the unionization quest started last summer, more than 3,000 of the 5,800 Bessemer warehouse workers signed cards indicating support for RWDSU to represent them in their fight to be able to collectively negotiate things like wages and safety standards, though an unknown number of those who expressed interest have since left the company. Amazon started holding mandatory informational sessions on unions and created a website warning employees of the potential economic downsides of unionizing, like the dues that union members pay, the argument that unions don’t create job security, and that unions are hard to abolish in a workplace once organized. Efforts to remind employees of union dues extended all over the plant, including in its bathrooms, according to a report from the Washington Post. Employees would close restroom stalls to flyers that read: “Where will your

dues go?” (Since Alabama is a right-to-work state, employees would not be obligated to join the union or pay dues.)

The anti-union culture has made what some employees initially considered to be a physically taxing workplace to be an emotionally draining one as well. “I go in there every day thinking and hoping I can continue on working through this—that they won’t mess with me, that they won’t fire me,” says Richardson. “Of course, I’m afraid because I need my job like everybody else.”

‘The start of a really big growth spurt’

After the voting period ends in Bessemer on Monday, it may take several days for the National Labor Relations Board to count all the ballots. Experts are split on which side will win.

Chris Edwards, the director of tax policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank, doesn’t expect the results to go in RWDSU’s favor. Union membership in the private sector has fallen from 32% in 1960 to merely 6% today. “The threshold, this whole time, to organize a workplace is just the bare majority of 51%,” Edwards says. “Labor unions have tried to organize many private sector workplaces, and they failed over and over.” And few of those organizing attempts were against a company with as many resources as Amazon, either.

But there are signals of a union revival, and the Bessemer workers have gained support from prominent national politicians. In February, President Joe Biden released a video in which he referenced the vote in Alabama and said “unions built the middle class” and they “put power in the hands of workers.” Democrats in Congress have also expressed support for the warehouse workers: Sen. Bernie Sanders, who ran staunchly pro-union presidential campaigns in 2016 and 2020 visited Bessemer to meet with union advocates on Friday, while the Democrat-led House of Representatives recently passed the PRO Act, which would strengthen unions by banning types of employer interference in union elections and allowing unions to override the aspect of right-to-work laws that allows employees to opt out of paying dues in a unionized workplace. (The bill passed in the House with the help of five Republican members, but is unlikely to pass in the Senate.) Public support for labor unions is also widening: According to a September 2020 Gallup report, 65% of Americans approved of labor unions, a high point that hadn’t been reached in nearly two decades.

This uptick can partially be attributed to the pandemic, says Rep. Bobby Scott, the chairman of the House Committee on Education and Labor who introduced the PRO Act. “It’s a gradual increase in popularity of unions generally, and the desire of people to want to join unions, and the pandemic, where people have noticed that they don’t have an effective way to communicate with their employer about unsafe working conditions,” he says. “I think all of those combined have led to much more interest in new unions.”

Taken together, these factors might foretell future unionization attempts at other Amazon warehouses and beyond, whether or not the RWDSU is ultimately successful in Bessemer. “The workers are in motion and the public and political sentiment are more and more supportive of unions than they’ve been in quite some time,” says Madland of Center for American Progress. “I think there’s a chance for this to be a really big moment for the future of labor unions in this country, where a lot of positive factors are coming together that signal this could be the start of a really big growth spurt.”

Darryl Richardson hasn't had much time to think about the national ramifications of his attempt to unionize a single warehouse in Alabama. Between Amazon shifts, union canvassing calls, and interviews with reporters, he's physically and mentally spent.

If the vote goes in his favor, Richardson will finally feel like he can rest. But not before he processes the last year, what he's attempted, and how it may affect workers nationwide. "I believe I will cry first," he says. "It be overwhelming."