

Amazon Workers Shouldn't Have to Work This Hard to Win a Union

Via [Jacobin](#)

Voting has [wrapped up](#) in the election to determine whether fifty-eight hundred workers at an [Amazon warehouse](#) in Bessemer, Alabama will join the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). If they win, they would be the first Amazon workers in the United States to unionize. The election is [historic](#), and not only because it would be the first win at one of the biggest and most important companies in the United States. It would also be a rare win for [unions in the South](#), a region of the country where unions have had [particular difficulty](#) organizing, and where union membership rates are [especially low](#). The majority-black workforce has [linked their union campaign](#) to the [#BlackLivesMatter](#) movement and the fight for civil rights in the South.

Politicians like Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Stacey Abrams, and more [have voiced support](#). President Biden stopped short of calling for a yes vote, but [issued a video](#) endorsing the right of “workers in Alabama” to join a union, and called on employers not to intervene. Celebrities have [weighed in](#), as have many other unions in the United States and [around the world](#), including the [NFL Players' Association](#).

The Amazon union campaign in Alabama is indeed important. But we should ask why, in 2021 in the United States, is it considered such a momentous event for workers to decide whether or not to join a union?

After all, joining a union and engaging in collective

bargaining is a [federally protected legal right](#), enshrined in the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. Article 23 of the UN's [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) states that "everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of [their] interests." So what makes this act of exercising one's basic legal and human rights such a big deal?

It's such a big deal because employers and [existing law](#) throw up so many [barriers to workers](#) exercising their legal rights that the simple act of joining a union requires untold levels of bravery, determination, and heroism. US workers, not just at Amazon, must put their livelihoods and personal safety at risk to join a union, all while enduring constant [employer-sponsored](#) harassment, threats, and intimidation.

This is unique in a country that prides itself on being a "[nation of joiners](#)." When it comes to forming or joining virtually any other organization, it is a mundane and routine act, celebrated as part of Americans' constitutionally protected freedom of association.

This is even the case when these organizations engage in contentious activity. If my neighbors and I, for example, were concerned about a local oil refinery dumping toxins into a nearby river, we could create an organization to fight that pollution. Chartering the organization would require filing some paperwork, and those who wanted to join might be asked to fill out a form and pay some membership dues. Depending on how effective our group was, we may incite the ire of the oil company, which could threaten and harass us in various ways in an attempt to weaken and defeat us.

But no matter how aggressive they got, at no point could the oil company have a say in who is or is not allowed to join our group, nor could they meet one-on-one with group members to convince them that being part of the group is a bad idea, or suggest that joining might cost them their livelihood. Our

decision to form our group, and others' decision about whether or not to join it, would be ours and ours alone.

This is not the case when it comes to unions. Employers have free rein to threaten and intimidate workers, bringing them into special meetings during work time, sending anti-union emails and texts, and a slew of other tactics. We have seen all of this and more at the Bessemer Amazon warehouse, where workers [can't even go to the bathroom](#) without being subject to a barrage of anti-union propaganda.

What's more, employers can weigh in on who is eligible to join the union, and how they join. In Alabama, Amazon insisted that the union election had to include [temporary seasonal workers](#), and tried (unsuccessfully) to have the election done on-site rather than by mail.

The only other instance where laws come this close to allowing organizations' opponents to interfere in people exercising their legal rights is voting rights. During the [Jim Crow era](#), laws in the South made the Fifteenth Amendment a dead letter, denying blacks and poor whites their constitutional right to vote. Today, political parties can [gerrymander](#) voting districts in a way that lets them choose their own voters, while new "[election integrity](#)" laws being passed at the state level are creating what Stacey Abrams has called "[Jim Crow in a suit and tie](#)."

It took a civil rights movement and the 1965 [Voting Rights Act](#) to secure black Americans' right to vote, and a new workers movement and new laws will be required to reverse the recent backsliding on voting rights. The same goes for labor rights. Workers [fought hard](#) to win [those rights](#) in 1935, but the titanic struggle in Bessemer highlights just how much those rights have eroded. *Workers shouldn't have to be heroes to exercise their basic rights.*

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rights. The [PRO Act](#), which recently [passed the House](#) and is now being considered in the Senate, would fix many problems with current labor law, particularly by limiting employers' ability to interfere with workers' choice about whether or not to join a union.

But workers cannot rely on legislators to pass labor law reform – especially if the Senate filibuster stays in place. Restoring and expanding labor rights will require more workers to follow in the Bessemer workers' footsteps and organize the kind of fight that won labor rights in the 1930s.

If they win, workers will still have many heroic battles to fight, especially in this era of growing inequality. It's just that the fight to join a union won't be one of them.