

U.S. Amazon workers' union push draws global attention

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Amazon workers in Alabama call for union to represent their rights (Photo: Jay Reeves/AP)

Birmingham, March 27 (RHC)-- A major union drive is taking place among Amazon workers in the United States. At one warehouse in the U.S. state of Alabama, workers took over a church parking lot in

Bessemer, delivering speeches in between chants and calls urging Amazon to treat its employees better.

“I am ready to fight. I am tired. I want everyone to hear me, we’re in this together,” said Linda Burns, an Amazon worker who shared her experience of being reprimanded by a supervisor for taking too long during a bathroom break.

Burns is one of a small but growing number of Amazon workers who are publicly calling for a union at the Bessemer warehouse. With just a few days until the vote closes on March 29th, the majority of the more than 5,800 workers at the site still haven’t cast their ballots.

As Burns addressed the small crowd on March 22, a crowd of TV news cameras trained their lenses on her, underscoring just how much attention the typically quiet Birmingham suburb has attracted in the last few weeks. If the pro-union campaign prevails, Bessemer will become the first unionised Amazon facility in the United States. Amazon has several unionised facilities overseas.

Many of the workers' complaints about how Amazon treats its workers are not new. Workers having to urinate in bottles has now become part of American folklore (although the company denies the claim), and the company has an alarmingly high number of workers who have either been seriously injured or even killed on the job, according to leaked documents revealed by The Center for Investigative Reporting.

Then there’s the issue of “time off task” or TOT. Workers in Bessemer say they’re only allotted so much time each day to go to the bathroom, take a water break and grab something to eat.

According to workers, these breaks are rigorously patrolled and any extra seconds “off task” are tallied and recorded. Once an employee has spent too many minutes off task, workers say they are automatically dismissed, underscoring incredibly high turnover rates for the company across the country.

In some places, Amazon facility turnover rates are as high as 89 percent, according to a March 2020 report by the National Employment Law Project.

The facility is so big that workers often compare it to Buckingham Palace, leading to anxiety over whether or not they will have enough time to walk to a bathroom or water dispenser — and whether there will be a line or any cups available when they get there.

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