

Amazon faces off with union in fight for a second warehouse

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Amazon workers and supporters march during a rally in Castleton-On-Hudson in New York state. This is the third time that the labor union is taking on Amazon since its historic win in April [File: Rachel Phua/AP Photo]

New York, October 17 (RHC)-- The startup union that clinched a historic labor victory at Amazon earlier this year is slated to face the company yet again, aiming to rack up more wins that could force the reluctant retail behemoth to the negotiating table.

This time, the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) and the nation's second-largest private employer are facing off in the town of Schodack, near Albany, in New York state. Workers at the warehouse there, which employs roughly 800 people according to Amazon, finished voting in a union election on Monday. The votes will be tallied Tuesday by the National Labor Relations Board.

"There are also a lot of odds against us, but I think there's definitely a huge possibility we might win," said Sarah Chaudhry, an 18-year-old who has been organising workers since joining the company two months ago. "I can't jinx it."

The face-off near the state's capitol — one of the most unionised metro areas in the country, according to Unionstats.com — marks the third time the ALU is taking on Amazon following its initial win at a Staten Island facility in April. That victory — the first ever for an Amazon facility in the US — came as a surprise even to those sympathetic to the union's calls for a \$30 hourly wage and better working conditions for warehouse workers.

But soon enough, challenges began to appear. A loss at a second, nearby warehouse in May took some wind out of the union's sail. Fractures were exposed when some prominent organisers left the group.

Elsewhere, the union lost time and resources attempting to cement its lone win. Amazon has accused the ALU and the NLRB's field office in Brooklyn of tainting the vote. In a quest for a redo election, the company filed more than two dozen objections with the agency, triggering a lengthy process that could take years to resolve.

Last month, a federal labor official who presided over the hearings ruled against the company, which has noted it intends to appeal. During an interview last month, Amazon CEO Andy Jassy also signalled the retail giant could drag the case to federal court. "Amazon is ready to fight this to the death," said John Logan, the director of labor and employment studies at San Francisco State University. "And the problem for the Amazon Labor Union is if you only have one warehouse ... you're never going to have enough leverage to force the company to bargain."

The election in Albany offers the ALU a chance to show its win is not a one-off, experts say. Heather Goodall, the main worker organiser in the facility, launched the campaign at the warehouse in May, three months after joining the company and a month after the Staten Island win. Her passion for unionising, she said, came from the death of her son, who died by suicide six years ago while working for a large company.

"So when I heard that there were working conditions that were suspicious in my own community — and I have a 17- and 15-year-old that attends the school district in the area where Amazon conducts its business — I wanted to see firsthand what was going on," Goodall said.

Amazon launched its own campaign to push back the organising effort. As it did with other warehouses, the company held mandatory meetings at the Schodack facility in an attempt to persuade workers to reject the union. It also put up flyers and signs across the warehouse urging workers to "vote no."

"Don't sign an ALU card," the company said on one sign posted on a screen at the facility. "The ALU is untested and unproven." "We've always said that we want our employees to have their voices heard, and we hope and expect this process allows for that," Paul Flanigan, an Amazon spokesperson, said in a statement.

Last week, Amazon workers at a separate facility in California's Moreno Valley filed for their own union election, seeking to join the ALU. Nannette Plascencia, who has worked at the warehouse for seven years, said she and her colleagues have been attempting to organise the facility for more than two years, but the company's famously high turnover rate had made it challenging to build up enough support.

Another election spearheaded by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) at a warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, remains too close to call with 416 challenged ballots still waiting for adjudication. The vote, held in February and March, was the union's second attempt to organize there, following a prior loss that it contested.

Unlike Starbucks stores that have voted to unionise by the hundreds in the past year, organising Amazon warehouses is a much more arduous task. The facilities typically employ hundreds — or thousands — of employees. And it can take months to build up enough showing of support for an election.

Amazon warehouse workers at a facility in Garner, North Carolina, a suburb of Raleigh, have been organising for months and plan to file for an election before the end of September next year, said Tim Platt, an Amazon worker who has been soliciting support for the campaign under a group called Carolina Amazonians United for Solidarity and Empowerment, or CAUSE. Organisers are taking their time to file for an election so they can be confident of the outcome by the time workers start voting.

The workers there chose not to align with the ALU, though organisers still coordinate with each other routinely. Platt said workers might join another union in the future. They have met with the Teamsters, which launched a division last month focused on organising Amazon workers. But for now, Platt said they are only focused on organising.

Mendoza, ALU's director of communications, said the union is trying to support other workers forming their own organising committees across the country. However, their main task will be filing their election petitions and building up more support at the facility that voted to unionise in case it needs to call for an action, such as a strike.

The union has been able to hire two full-time staff to help out with training and meetings. A \$250,000 donation from the American Federation of Teachers has also allowed them to get office space in Staten Island. They are building support, but it takes time, Mendoza said.

"You can lose some elections or win other ones," he said. "We're not concerned about an individual result the way Amazon is. They can't really afford to lose one."

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