

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

LABOR LOOKS UP AFTER AMAZON UNION VOTE

LAURA FLANDERS: The COVID-19 pandemic and its distinctly different impacts on people with and without power made the brutality of the workplace even more visible, writes journalist Sarah Jaffe. COVID also pushed work ever more deeply into every part of our lives, a process she tracks in her latest book "Work Won't Love You Back." But 2020 also had its upside. It accelerated the push for change from Black Lives Matter to Bessemer workers in Alabama at an enormous Amazon distribution center, waging a historic fight to unionize. Democrats in the house re-introduced the PRO Act to restore workers rights to organize. Even after a defeated Bessemer, labor leader Richard Trumka of the AFL-CIO called the opportunities for labor in this moment virtually limitless. So just what is it that renders this moment so pregnant with possibilities for workers and organized labor? Joining me now to discuss all of this are three reporters who've been on the front lines of all of these labor stories. Maximillian Alvarez is the editor in chief of The Real News Network based in Baltimore and host of the Working People podcast. He has a book of interviews with workers talking about their experiences during the pandemic, coming out soon. Sarah Jaffe is the author most recently of "Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone." She's the co-host with Michelle Chen of Dissent Magazine's marvelous Belabored podcast, and a reporting fellow at the Type Media Center. Kim Kelly is the labor columnist for Teen Vogue and The Baffler. She spent weeks in Bessemer, Alabama and she's the author of the forthcoming book "Fight Like Hell: An Unladylike History of Labor in the U.S." Welcome all. Glad to have you with me.

Let's start with this crazy COVID year of 2020. We heard a lot about how it was going to change everything in the workplace and everything about our lives. As far as I can see, it did change some things for some people. Some people made an enormous amount of money. Most of us found ourselves working more and harder at every minute, but there was some amazing organizing efforts, and I want to start with Bessemer.

KIM KELLY: So Bessemer, Alabama became this battleground for the future of labor almost by accident, right? A number of workers in the Amazon facility there - a gigantic warehouse where 5,800 people are employed. A couple of older workers who had union experience. They got there, they looked around, they realized what was happening, what they're being asked to do, what they're being put through. And they're like "Okay, something's gotta give. We need to do something about this." And so that kicked off an organizing effort that spanned months, that got tons of attention from the public and from politicians and from local people. It became a giant labor story. And it was incredibly important because this is a group of workers who are already marginalized, who are in an area in the deep South, in a right-to-work state in a deep red state with a Republican legislature who were taking on the richest man in the world.

LAURA FLANDERS: And Max, you went down there with cameras. I mean, just to describe it to people, 5,000, 6,000 workers in one warehouse.

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ: It's hard to really convey the size, but it's like multiple football fields stacked on top of each other with really one main entrance that thousands and thousands of workers are filtering into and out of on a day to day basis. It sits on top of land that used to kind of be a unionized workforce, belong to unionized workforce in the steel industry, right? I mean, and then the tale of what happened to the steel workers is really written into kind of the landscape of Bessemer itself. De-industrialization, right. You have long term effects of segregation, of racist, kind of economic policies that have hollowed out towns like Bessemer, which is a majority black town that does have twice the national poverty rate. And most of the workers in the Bessemer fulfillment center were black. The majority of them were black women, right? So in a lot of ways, the kind of historical erosion of the economic life of a place like Bessemer was very present in what we saw at the fulfillment center and in the workers who were there. And it was also what made this union effort so important, as like one potential mechanism for working people in the community itself to try to get back some of all that had been stolen from them over the decades.

KIM KELLY: And they were going up against Amazon, which is this massive corporate megalith of a company that has developed an incredibly sort of sophisticated surveillance system that allows them to monitor every moment and every second of these workers' lives and to treat them like machines, to treat them like robots. And that was one of the defining features of the campaign, was these folks, these workers saying, "We're not robots, we're humans."

LAURA FLANDERS: Now, Sarah, you were watching this of course and reporting from a bit more of a distance mostly. What was your take or what is your take on the significance of what happened?

SARAH JAFFE: Amazon, right? We are absolutely aware that if anything's gonna improve for workers in the world, not just the U.S. it's going to have to go through taking on companies like Amazon which, as Kim was saying, are massive surveillance companies. And Amazon is difficult to crack for so many reasons, one of them being that surveillance thing. The other being that really its profit engine is actually Amazon Web Services. It's not the retail side at all. And so it's been fascinating because workers at Amazon are organizing all over the place, right? Not just in Bessemer. Bessemer was the place that they said "We're gonna have a union election." And so it becomes a showdown in the way that American labor policy has been structured, has told us. And again, that is, as everybody has been saying, built around the idea of industrial labor. The Amazon warehouse is one of the few places where you have 5,000 workers in one place now. And so this was such an interesting thing because it brings back that moment of the huge

workplace of this global corporation. When the reality of the workplace has been that it's mostly been getting smaller, for most people. And then getting fissured and broken up.

LAURA FLANDERS: And yet there were similarities, it seems to me, in the nature of the work itself, meaning the surveillance part, the clocking in part, and what you write about, the needing to be grateful. You're already getting the \$15 and not mentioning that if you were unionized you'd probably be getting a whole lot more. Kim, back to you for a second. What happened and what continues today? You're now moving a little bit further out of town to cover a coal mining strike in Alabama.

KIM KELLY: Right. Well, in the Amazon union election we didn't get the result that those of us in the labor community were hoping for. The Amazon anti-union campaign was successful. The union election, the workers lost the vote, the union lost the vote. So now that decision is, that's being appealed. The union RWDSU has filed 23 charges with the NLRB. It's gonna end up in the courts. It's gonna be a long haul. Like this is not the last we're hearing of the Bessemer Amazon workers. And then just down the road, as this was all unfolding, 1100 coal miners at Warrior Met Coal, who are represented by the United Mine Workers of America. They've been on strike since April 1st, and now it's May. They're digging in for the long haul. It comes down to, again, that basic respect and dignity that the Amazon workers were looking for, for getting what they're due. These workers in Brookwood, Alabama, they're fighting to get a decent contract. They're doing this incredibly dangerous job, 12 hours a day, six days a week, no time to see their families, no time to take a break. They're working underground in the dark in one of the deepest mines in America which is filled with methane gas. I spoke to a young man, 22 years old, who is now in a wheelchair. He was paralyzed in an accident in the mines during his first week on the job. It's hard to emphasize how hard this life is for folks who do have this job. And just seeing the way that it intersected with the Amazon workers in Bessemer struggle. They're supporting each other's rallies. They were coming out and showing solidarity. It just shows how interconnected these struggles really are.

LAURA FLANDERS: A lot of things seem to be coming together in this moment. And I want to play you this clip from Richard Trumka from AFL-CIO. So the union, at the end of the Bessemer vote, it has a press conference announcing its defeat. And in that conference, Richard Trumka says this.

RICHARD TRUMKA: This is the moment when the potential for pro worker change is limitless. Let's harvest the power of what happened in Bessemer to manifest a new era of workplace freedom, a new wave of worker prosperity, and a new spirit of solidarity.

LAURA FLANDERS: Is this just spin coming from Richard Trumka? Grasping a victory out of a moment of defeat, or what does make this moment feel so pregnant with possibility?

SARAH JAFFE: To be kind of harsh, but true about this, the possibilities for organizing are nearly limitless because most workers in the U.S. are nowhere near having a union. We're at 6% private sector union density, which is a number that is burned into my brain, and I think about every single day. The good news is that for the first time in quite a long time, we've got, I can't believe I'm saying this about Joe Biden, but an administration that looks like it actually cares about workers' right to organize. I've been working on a story about Uber drivers and Lyft drivers and other gig economy workers. And one of the big fears when this administration came in because vice-president Kamala Harris' brother-in-law works for Uber. The big fear was that there was going to be this sort of push for Proposition 22 style third category status for gig economy workers nationwide, locking them permanently out of the protections of things like the Fair Labor Standards Act. And instead, we're seeing a lot of signaling in the other direction.

LAURA FLANDERS: Prop 22, that's the California proposition. I think the most costly ever put on the ballot, to fight back an initiative to have gig drivers, drivers for web based apps, categorized as the employees of those app owners.

SARAH JAFFE: One of the things that we should always remember is like yes, having a pro-labor administration in the Roosevelt Administration that pushed through legislation, that gave workers more rights to organize, was very helpful, but that came because workers were organizing, and workers were in motion. And so it's great to see workers in motion, but like this is going to have to get ratcheted up so much more to get to anything like a place where we can really see changes.

LAURA FLANDERS: And Max, you're responsible for covering these stories every day at the Real News and others. What happens in this moment?

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ: I think one of the things that made the Bessemer drive such a flash point for people is because it really put a spotlight on just how big Amazon is and how much power it has over, not just the workers at this one facility's lives, but all of our lives. In the pandemic, we became more dependent on Amazon than ever. Jeff Bezos made over \$70 million in one year alone, right? While most of us were suffering, while millions lost their jobs, while people kind of boiled in the lonesome brine of their own homes, this entity was really kind of amassing kind of unchecked power.

LAURA FLANDERS: All right. So now that I am indeed sort of drowning in the, what'd you call it? Lonesome brine of all the bad news, I'm going to come to you, Kim. 'Cause as Sarah reminds us in her excellent book, and I really appreciate Sarah, how every chapter you take us into the dire gloom and doom. And then it turns around into an organizing story, which has usually got a really inspiring aspect to it. And I'm sure that Bessemer was exactly that way, Kim.

The union, I don't suppose, just sort of folded up shop and decided to go home. The people that were involved in that struggle, if all the struggles I've ever been part of are any indication, were changed by it. What happens next for them? And then I want to ask all of you, in spite of everything that we've all just said about power in the hands of a few, there are some amazing organizing initiatives happening out there and organizing around big things, common good things that I think could be a future horizon for us as well. No? Maybe? Yes? Kim, the workers in Bessemer, how are they?

KIM KELLY: The union isn't going anywhere because the workers already have their union, right. A group of workers that come together and work collectively to better their lot in life and in the workplace, that's a union. It doesn't need federal recognition. In this instance, yeah, they went for the NLRB election. They want to play it that way. So yeah, there's a lot of legal challenges and hurdles to get through. But these workers, 1100 warehouse workers, majority black workforce, in one of the poorest cities in Alabama voted union yes. And that is not an insignificant thing. That's huge. And one of the most inspiring things about this drive, about the fact that these workers did stand up to the richest man in the world and said "No" is that now every other worker who heard about this or saw it reported on, or just saw it on the news, now they know that this is possible. You can stand up to corporate power. You can wage your own David and Goliath fight. And the next group of workers, they're gonna get even closer. Someone has to be the first and these workers in Bessemer, they took that leap of faith.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well Sarah, I know that when you talk about "Work Won't Love You Back" and I know that doesn't mean when you worked for me because you say at the back of your book that I was an exception. Thank you.

SARAH JAFFE: It's true

LAURA FLANDERS: But what you get from covering these stories is also partly the love of it. And you report on that beautifully both your own experience, but the experience of the people that you're working with. And in some cases, those are people who are organizing something that's never existed before. Can you talk about that?

SARAH JAFFE: Yeah. I think one of the things to talk about the NLRB process that Bessemer showed us is the NLRB process is broken, right? So it's not a great way to do things right now, which is why there are people all over the place, and a lot of the people that I wrote about in that book, who aren't doing that. They're doing something else. And as Kim said I joke about the Newsies rule, right? If we strike, then we're a union. Like workers become a union by acting like a union. They don't become a union by winning or losing an election. And so the Amazon workers, for instance, in outside of Minneapolis, organizing with the Awood center, which is a worker center based in the East African community there have been organizing, have been

having walk outs, have been doing this for years. And these are mostly Somali, migrant workers, black women in hijab, who don't speak a lot of English in a lot of cases who have organized walkouts and actually gotten Amazon to bargain. They won their demands around accommodation for prayer time and for their fasting during Ramadan. I love that story for a lot of reasons. One, because the workers are amazing, but also because it reminds us that workers don't just organize around quote, unquote bread and butter issues. They organize around dignity and they organize around whatever it is that is meaningful to them.

LAURA FLANDERS: Will the PRO Act make a difference, Kim?

KIM KELLY: The PRO Act would be a great step forward. It would be essentially, it would be a Band-Aid on a bullet wound. We've been bleeding out for decades. Labor has been in a bad spot since before I was born. And now we have this chance to reform some of those broken labor laws and to make it easier for folks to organize, to make it easier to engage in solidarity strikes and get rid of Taft-Hartley, to help reach out and include some of the workers who have been left out of our original labor laws. And even with the PRO Act, they still won't protect everyone, because there are still workers whose work is criminalized and stigmatized.

LAURA FLANDERS: So let me come back to you, Max, on that. I mean, when we're talking about everyone, you head up the news part of a media operation in Baltimore that is speaking to everyone, including a lot of young people who may not consider the labor movement the frontline of their battle. How do you report on it? And how are you thinking of labor as you do this work? 'Cause it's no longer just about the organization with the cute logo.

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ: No, no, it very much is not. And I mean, I think one of the beautiful parts of where we are right now thinking from the media side, right, is how many people are invested in this work and how many people are responding. I mean, the mere fact that the Bessemer union drive was as national of a story, international of a story as it was, is pretty significant, when you think about where the culture in this country has been. I grew up very conservative, very Catholic, son of an immigrant family that came from poverty and worked its way to the middle-class and then lost everything in the recession, right? Like so many millions did. And one of the things that I noticed and that my show Working People grew out of, it grew out of our family's experience. The first guest I ever had on my show was my dad, Jesus Alvarez because I saw him receding into himself and not dealing with this, not talking about it, feeling like a global recession was entirely his fault. But then when he started to drive for Uber just to pay rent, he started getting in conversations with the people he was driving, realizing that they were his age, that they were also immigrants, that they had also lost their homes, that he was driving them, people who are his age to their third or second job. And that's when he started to realize that he was not alone and that our family was not alone. I think that, going back to your question, Laura, about kind of the positives here, I do think it is a positive that more people are

seeing themselves in that sort of light. And they are seeing the kind of connections that they have with their neighbors and their coworkers.

LAURA FLANDERS: What, in that context does the union of tomorrow look like to you, Max? To your family, to the people you work around?

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ: There is no one way to kind of do this. But what I do think is really exciting, as you said, Laura, is that, we're not just thinking about unions in this kind of old school industrial term where it's kind of rough neck kind of white guys in hard hats. I mean, of course they are part of our movement, but there are so many people gig workers, care workers. I mean, up until 2019, the most common professions were retail salesperson, fast food counter workers, cashiers, and then a rapidly rising kind of numbers in home healthcare aids for an aging population of the boomer population that has no one else to take care of them. And so now the younger generations are getting employed in that area. And these people are also leading the charge to demand the rights in their own workplace, to expand our understanding of what dignity, living with dignity looks like, and how we can connect our respective struggles across state lines, national lines, and even professional lines.

LAURA FLANDERS: And COVID, the COVID pandemic has just lit a fire under so many of these demands. Sarah, I don't know whether you have a vision of a union or a kind of union or work in the future, but what do you see out there? And are you gonna be reporting on it?

SARAH JAFFE: What does it look like to have the one big union? Because one of the things that we've had in this country but also across the world really in recent years is a growth of interest in socialism, in left wing politics, without a sort of corresponding rise in union activity and union density. And so I think a lot about like these old, like the IWW, which was still a collection of unions that were part of this thing or the Knights of Labor, where you had these models of a big union that everybody joined, that wasn't built by winning workplace by workplace, but it was built by joining and taking care of each other and learning from each other. And I mean the Knights of Labor and the IWW each have their problems. But what is a model like that, that brings in young people who are interested in a class politics and helps them turn that to where they work?

KIM KELLY: Like Sarah was talking about, when the IWW and Knights of Labor were really out here before, like the critique of capitalism that was inherent in the labor movement there has kind of fallen by the wayside because we've seen this much more, this modern push to kind of work hand in hand with the Democratic party, to kind of toe the centrist party line, to shy away from really pushing in a really demonstrable way against capitalism.

LAURA FLANDERS: Which is of course where love comes in. And I just have to end by quoting you, quoting Silvia Federici in your latest book, Sarah. "We want to call work what is work so that eventually we might rediscover what is love." We didn't get to talk about love much in this conversation but maybe that offers us a way through. If we weren't working quite so much, we might be able to love a little bit more?

SARAH JAFFE: That's the hope anyway. And I would just also say that that solidarity that all of these workers are expressing is a form of love, right?

LAURA FLANDERS: Max?

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ: Yeah. I mean, I'm so glad that we ended on this point and to anyone who hasn't read Sarah's book, they absolutely should. But I think that's also what the pandemic showed us, right? The pandemic was an incredibly hard thing for all of us to go through. There were so many who lost their lives, who lost their jobs. And it was a really tough thing for all of us, not just in the U.S. but around the world to go through. But we also saw what held society together, right? It was people. It was people caring at home for their children. It was people leaning on each other and providing the mutual aid that the government and the market would not, right. It was people building solidarity with one another even banging pots and pans outside of their windows to show support for the frontline workers who are risking their lives to kind of keep society from falling apart. It was not the billionaire class that saved us from this mess. It was one another. It was us. We held ourselves together, and we are the ones as Kim beautifully said who are gonna find a way to a better world. And I think the pandemic really showed us that. It showed us not only whose labor really makes society go but also how we all have the collective strength to build the world that we deserve.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, I can't think of a better last word than that. So Maximillian Alvarez, thank you so much for closing us out there. Kim Kelly, Sarah Jaffe, folks check out their work. There's a link at our website. I wanna thank you all for being on the show. That was great. I'll be back in just a minute with a few closing thoughts.

If union is as union does, I see a lot of unified activity in this country. It's just not mostly on the part of the workers. Take right now. There's a chorus coming from that employer union called the Chamber of Commerce, that it's hard to find workers because of all those generous unemployment benefits. Well, the arguments bunk based on economic studies, but let's look more deeply than that. The employers complain that workers are getting rich off the public purse, but who's really benefiting from the unified action that you see out there? I see unified action to stop a raise in the minimum wage. We haven't seen one of those in 11 years. I see unified action to resist providing affordable, reliable childcare, unified action to spread the idea that workers need to be desperate so that they compete for jobs. That keeps wages low. Who benefits then? It's

that unified force of employers that benefits. Someone gets rich off the public purse. It's just not the workers. So when Sarah Jaffe says unions have nowhere to go but up, maybe it's the reverse. There's plenty of unions at the top of our society. It's the people at the bottom that need more unified power. And maybe right now with a little more money in their pocket, they're getting that. Would that be so bad? I'm Laura Flanders for The Laura Flanders Show. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious, and thanks for joining us.

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