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USA

Union and Company Fight Guerrilla War at Starbucks

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Starbucks workers and their union, Workers United, are engaged in a guerrilla war against the multi-billion-dollar coffee shop company: Small actions, picking off one store at a time. As more workers around the country organize, seek union recognition, and walk out on strike, Starbucks management is fighting back by closing stores and firing employees. The union guerrillas are gaining ground, yet not able to wage class war on a regional or national scale.

The current union organizing drive at Starbucks began about a year ago, in the spring of 2021, and in December of that year a Buffalo, New York store won its union election becoming the first to organize. Since then, there have been dozens more and momentum is growing. So far 100 Starbucks coffee shops—most with 10 to 20 employees—have voted to join Workers United, while only 14 voted against; that is, the union won 88% of its elections. About 120 other shops are currently conducting elections or waiting to vote. While the total number of workers is small, this represents a significant upturn in union organizing, especially in the restaurant industry where only 1.2 percent of workers have unions.

With Workers United growing, the company is retaliating. Over the last several months Starbucks has fired twenty employees engaged in union organizing activities, always formally fired for something else of course, such as breaking a company rule. Starbucks recently announced that it is closing one of the recently organized stores in Ithaca, New York where workers had walked out on strike. Workers United has filed with the National Labor Relations Board some 175 charges of unfair labor practices.

Yet the workers and the union are undeterred. The Service Employees International Union with two million members, one of the largest unions in the United States, has created for its affiliate Workers United a one-million-dollar strike fund to compensate the pay of strikers. Meanwhile, the union's organizing is spreading across the country and into regions with few unions. For example, the union recently won National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election victories in the South: in New Orleans, Louisiana; Tallahassee, Florida; and Columbia, South Carolina. Organizing a union in South Carolina, the state with the lowest unionization rate in the United States, where only 1.7 percent of its workers are represented by unions, represents a significant achievement.

The Guerrilla Army

The Starbucks union movement reflects the workforce; it is a movement of mostly young women and men of all races. Women make up 70 percent of Starbucks workers; whites are 50 percent, but Latinos are 27 percent, and Blacks 8 percent; and most workers are in their twenties and thirties.

Starbucks workers are organizing because the work is too intense, the pay is too little, conditions are not always safe, and they feel that the company often doesn't respect them. A Starbucks barista makes an average of \$13.50 an hour or \$26,325 per year, which is not a living wage. Starbucks workers have been seeking to win union recognition through NLRB elections, but they have also engaged in walkouts and short strikes, actions that are important to building the workers' confidence and increasing the union's combativity. Both the elections and the strike have raised the union's visibility so that other Starbucks workers also see the possibility of organizing.

The Starbucks organizing campaign, using guerrilla tactics, has been tremendously successful. One has to admire this achievement. They have organized 100 coffee shops—but there are 15,400 in the country. The workers have not yet built a large enough presence to organize regionally, much less nationally, and it will probably take regional or

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even a national strike—as happened in other industries like auto and steel, transportation and public employees—to bring the union to all Starbuck workers.

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