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USA

Starbucks Workers Organize at a Store in New York State—Is It Just the Beginning?

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Workers at a Starbucks coffee shop in Buffalo, New York voted earlier this month to form a union, the first successful union organizing campaign at the company in more than 35 years. The workers at the Elmwood store in Buffalo voted 19 in favor and 8 against the union, though at the same time workers the Camp Road store in Buffalo voted 12 to 8 against forming a union.

The workers voted to join the Starbucks Workers United, an independent affiliate of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), one of the largest unions in the country. “It feels surreal and incredibly exciting,” said Casey Moore, a barista at one of the Buffalo Starbucks stores. “I’m so excited to see other baristas at Starbucks and across the service industry say ‘if they can do it, we can do it here too.’ We can change the service industry.”

Could this small victory be a turning point for Starbucks and other coffee shop and fast-food workers? Maybe, but there are many obstacles.

Starbucks workers are taking on a monster. Starbucks net worth is almost \$20 billion, with some 33,833 stores worldwide employing 349,000 people. In the United States there are 9,000 stores with 235,000 employees. The company promotes itself as a part of the community, promises inclusion of all employees regardless of race and gender, claims to be environmentally friendly. It calls its employees “partners,” but the average pay of just \$12.27 an hour or about \$21,750 a year is not a living wage. Those who work more than 20 hours a week are eligible for health insurance benefits for themselves and their families, but employees themselves have to pay for the expensive insurance.

Who are the Starbucks workers? Just over 50 percent of the workers are white, while 8% are Black and 27.5% Latino. Starbucks workers are overwhelmingly female: 70 percent women. And the workforce is young, with an average age of 27.

What are the obstacles to organizing? U.S. workers can win legal recognition for their union through government supervised elections, as the Starbucks workers did. Since the union has now been recognized, the law requires Starbucks to bargain in good faith. But will it really? Back in 1985, workers in two facilities successfully organized at Starbucks, but the company stalled negotiations, meanwhile organized a decertification campaign and by 1987 the company had succeeded in ridding itself of the union. Or Starbucks could simply close the unionized store.

Today, many Starbucks workers are just passing through while going to college or figuring out what to do with their lives. The company has an annual turnover rate of 65 percent, compared to 12 to 15% for all U.S. workers. Most have no commitment to the company or the job, plan to leave and so may not have an interest in a union. While 75 percent of people ages 18-29 favor unions, nevertheless in the United States, only 6% of private sector workers are organized and only 1.3% in the restaurant industry.

Second, Starbucks opposes unions, so from the beginning, workers may feel intimidated; and the company has been willing to engage in anti-union and even illegal actions to defeat unions. Dispersed across the country in small stores with an average of twenty employees turning over rapidly, it can be difficult to establish a sense of solidarity and power—though as the Buffalo workers have shown, it can be done.

The SEIU, with 1.1 million members, has the size and resources to support a unionization campaign. Will the workers

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be able to make use of SEIU, a leader of the fight for \$15 movement, yet is also a bureaucratic and sometimes quite undemocratic union?

If workers can succeed in organizing at Starbucks, then they can begin to organize the other 500,000 coffee shop workers and the nearly 5 million fast food industry workers. It will be done by one worker talking to another and convincing them that we all need a union at work.

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