Starbucks Corporation (“Employer”) operates retail coffeehouses. On May 20, 2022, Workers United affiliated with Service Employees International Union (“Petitioner”) filed a representation petition seeking to represent approximately nineteen (19) employees employed by the Employer at its store located at 5310 Liberty Ave., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15224 (Store 7625 referred to as the “Liberty and Baum Store”), in Allegheny County.

The appropriateness of the petitioned-for bargaining unit is not in dispute, the only issue in this case is the method of election. A hearing was held before a Hearing Officer of the National Labor Relations Board (the Board) via videoconference on June 10, 2022, at which time the parties were afforded the opportunity to present evidence and to state their respective positions on the record. The parties submitted post-hearing briefs, which I have carefully considered, with the Employer maintaining that a manual election held at the Liberty and Baum Store is mandated by Board precedent and the current realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Petitioner contending that a mail-ballot election is appropriate.

The Board has delegated its authority in this proceeding to me under Section 3(b) of the National Labor Relations Act (the Act). Having considered the parties’ positions, evidence, and the entire record, and for the reasons described below, I find that applying the Board's decision in Aspirus Keweenaw, 370 NLRB No. 45 (2020), to the circumstances in the instant case, a mail-ballot election is warranted due to the high COVID-19 test positivity rate in Allegheny County.

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1 To the extent the formal documents did not correctly reflect the parties’ names, the parties stipulated to amend the formal documents to accurately reflect the names as identified herein.
I. METHOD OF ELECTION

A. The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on daily life in the United States in the last two years. Despite unprecedented efforts to limit transmission, to date approximately 86 million people in the United States have been infected with COVID-19 and over 1 million people have died.\(^2\)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), has determined “[l]imiting close face-to-face contact with others is the best way to reduce the spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).”\(^3\) According to the CDC, “[a]ttending events and gatherings increases your risk of getting and spreading COVID-19,”\(^4\) Many of the measures recommended by the Federal, state, and local governments to prevent the spread of the virus are well-known at this point: avoid crowds, practice good hygiene, maintain at least a 6-foot distance between individuals, and use masks when around other people.\(^5\)

Because of the risk of infection associated with gatherings and in-person activities, the pandemic has also impacted the way the Board conducts its elections. The Board has traditionally conducted in-person, manual elections and used mail-ballot elections in limited circumstances. In 2020, in Aspirus Keweenaw, the Board addressed the circumstances where the pandemic may dictate appropriate use of mail-ballot elections. As the pandemic has ebbed and flowed over the years since Aspirus the result has been an increase in the use of the mail-ballot procedures. KMS Commercial Painting, LLC, 371 NLRB No. 69, slip op. at 1 (2022) (304 mail ballot elections taking place in fiscal year 2022). Mail-ballot procedures have allowed the Board to continue conducting elections even in the face of high COVID-19 transmission rates. As the Board stated in KMS, “during the pandemic, the Board's mail ballot procedures have served the Board's mission of ensuring free and fair elections, while also ensuring the health and safety of employees, parties, and Board personnel throughout the election process.” \textit{Id.}

B. Board Standard

Congress has entrusted the Board with a wide degree of discretion in establishing the procedures and safeguards necessary to ensure the fair and free choice of bargaining representatives, and the Board in turn has delegated the discretion to determine the arrangements for an election to Regional Directors. San Diego Gas & Elec., 325 NLRB 1143, 1144 (1998); citing Halliburton Services, 265 NLRB 1154 (1982); National Van Lines, 120 NLRB 1343, 1346


\(^4\) \textit{Id.}

\(^5\) \textit{Id.}
Starbucks Corp.
06-RC-296143

(1958); *NLRB v. A.J. Tower Co.*, 329 U.S. 324, 330 (1946). This discretion includes the ability to direct a mail-ballot election where appropriate. *San Diego Gas*, 325 NLRB at 1144-45.

The Board’s longstanding policy is that elections should, as a rule, be conducted manually. *National Labor Relations Board Casehandling Manual Part Two Representation Proceedings*, Sec. 11301.2. However, a Regional Director may reasonably conclude, based on circumstances tending to make voting in a manual election difficult, to conduct an election by mail ballot. *Id.* This includes a few specific situations addressed by the Board, including where voters are “scattered” over a wide geographic area, “scattered” in time due to employee schedules, in strike situations, or other unspecified extraordinary circumstances. *San Diego Gas*, 325 NLRB at 1145.

After a brief pause in elections early in the pandemic, the Board resumed conducting elections in April 2020, with many Regional Directors, including this Region’s Director, directing primarily mail-ballot elections in light of the extraordinary circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. To assist Regional Directors in determining when a manual election could be conducted safely, on July 6, 2020, the General Counsel issued a memorandum titled “Suggested Manual Election Protocols,” *Memorandum GC 20-10*, setting forth detailed suggested manual election protocols.

In *Aspirus Keweenaw*, 370 NLRB No. 45 (2020), the Board addressed how Regional Directors should assess the risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic when considering the appropriate method of election. In doing so, the Board reaffirmed its long-standing policy favoring manual elections and outlined six situations that suggest the propriety of mail ballots due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, when one or more of the following situations is present, a Regional Director should consider directing a mail-ballot election:

1. The Agency office tasked with conducting the election is operating under “mandatory telework” status;
2. Either the 14-day trend in number of new confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the county where the facility is located is increasing, or the 14-day testing positivity rate in the county where the facility is located is 5 percent or higher;
3. The proposed manual election site cannot be established in a way that avoids violating mandatory state or local health orders relating to maximum gathering size;
4. The employer fails or refuses to commit to abide by *GC Memo 20-10*, “Suggested Manual Election Protocols;”
5. There is a current COVID-19 outbreak at the facility or the employer refuses to disclose and certify its current status; or
6. Other similarly compelling circumstances.

*Id.* slip op. at 4-7. The existence of one or more of these situations will normally suggest that a mail ballot is appropriate under the “extraordinary circumstances presented by this pandemic.” *Id.* slip op. at 4. The Regional Director has discretion to conduct an election by mail

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6 I note that the provisions of the Casehandling Manual are not binding procedural rules; it is issued by the General Counsel of the National Labor Relations Board (General Counsel) and not the Board and is intended to provide guidance to regional personnel in the handling of representations cases. See *Patient Care*, 360 NLRB 637, 638 (2014), citing *Solvent Services*, 313 NLRB 645, 646 (1994).
ballot “under the peculiar conditions of each case.” Id. slip op. at 3 (citing National Van Lines, 120 NLRB at 1346). The Regional Director’s determination to conduct an election manually or by mail is subject to an abuse of discretion standard. Aspirus, 370 NLRB No. 45, slip op. at 3 (citing San Diego Gas & Electric, 325 NLRB at 1144 n. 4). Finally, in Aspirus, the Board noted that a Regional Director who directs a mail-ballot election under one or more of the foregoing six situations will not have abused her or his discretion. Aspirus, 370 NLRB No. 45, slip op. at 8.

C. The Parties’ Positions

The Employer contends that a manual election held at the Liberty and Baum Store is appropriate. Specifically, the Employer argues that the Board should abandon its standard under Aspirus Keweenaw, 370 NLRB No. 45 (2020) because the pandemic circumstances have changed and evolved, as this case was decided before the availability of multiple COVID-19 vaccines and at-home COVID-19 testing. The Employer asserts that the Board should instead return to the standard under San Diego Gas & Elec., 325 NLRB 1143 (1998), in which case a manual election would be appropriate. The Employer also highlights that manual elections are more accurate and fair, as demonstrated by alleged issues7 with recent mail-ballot elections involving employees of the Employer, including some elections conducted by this Region.

Per the Employer, even assuming the Aspirus Keweenaw test applies, a manual election is still appropriate as the Region is not subject to a mandatory telework order, there are no government orders restricting gathering, the Employer agrees to abide by the necessary Board protocols—including those set forth in GC Memorandum 20-10, and there is no current outbreak at the Liberty and Baum Store. In its brief, the Employer further argues that although Allegheny County’s COVID-19 positivity is currently above 5% due to a recent spike, the CDC lists the County as a “Low” risk and the positivity trend shows a steady decline since February, leading to a reasonable conclusion that the positivity rate will be below 5% on the date the Region’s Decision and Direction of Election is issued.

The Employer proposes that an in-person election be held June 28, 2022 with the votes occurring at two separate time periods from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m., in order to provide a voting opportunity to employees working all shifts, namely the opening shift, mid-day shift, and closing shift. The Employer proposes to close the Liberty and Baum Store to the public during all voting times, and it has also expressed a willingness to have multiple voting periods over the course of two days.

Petitioner contends that a mail ballot election is appropriate because test positivity rate in Allegheny County is far above the five percent threshold set by the Board in Aspirus Keweenaw. The Petitioner further argues that, independent from Aspirus Keweenaw, a mail-ballot election would also be warranted under San Diego Gas because a number of employees at the Liberty and Baum Store work part-time and therefore a mail-ballot election would be warranted because they are “scattered” in time due to their variable work schedules.

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7 Including low voter turnout.
D. Determination

I conclude that a mail-ballot election is appropriate based on the COVID-19 test positivity rate in Allegheny County, the county where the Liberty and Baum Store is located.

Several of the Aspirus Keweenaw factors are not relevant to my determination in this case. As the Employer contends, the Region tasked with conducting the election is not operating under mandatory telework status, mandatory state or local health orders relating to maximum gathering size are not at issue, the Employer has committed to abide by Memorandum GC 20-10, and there is no evidence of a current outbreak at the Store. The only factor I find requires a detailed analysis is the remaining factor: whether the 14-day trend in number of new confirmed cases in the county where the Liberty and Baum Store is located is increasing, or the 14-day testing positivity rate is 5 percent or higher.

The Board in Aspirus Keweenaw directed Regional Directors to, in considering these statistical factors, utilize the data published by Johns Hopkins University, or from official state or local government sources. The Board further stated where county level data is not available, Regional Directors should look to state level data.

The first contingency at issue here is whether the 14-day trend in number of new confirmed cases in the county where the Liberty and Baum Store is located is increasing. Allegheny County reports COVID-19 data on a weekly basis. This reporting frequency is reflected in the data published by John Hopkins University, with non-reporting days reflecting a “0” as a null value, not an indication of zero cases. As of June 23, 2022, the Johns Hopkins University & Medicine Coronavirus Resource Center reports a -14-day case count (the data point matching the 14-day time range prescribed by the Board) in Allegheny County of 3,675 cases. Specifically, from day -14 to -7 there were 2,361 cases and from day -7 to the present there were 1,314 cases, a decrease of 1,047 cases. I find this data reflects a generally decreasing trend in Allegheny County.

Regarding the second contingency, whether the 14-day testing positivity rate in Allegheny County is 5 percent or higher, as of June 23, 2022, Allegheny County reports a 7-day average of 14.9 percent for the 7-day period ending on June 15, the most recent reporting date. Seven days prior to June 15, on June 8, the 7-day average was 18.2 percent. Taken together, this data demonstrates the testing positivity rate has been well-above 5 percent in Allegheny County during the most recent 14-day period for which data is available.

Aspirus Keweenaw directs that a mail ballot election may be appropriate where either one of the two contingencies described above are met. As I find the test positivity rate in Allegheny County is above the Board’s 5 percent threshold, I conclude that this is a sufficient basis to order a mail ballot election consistent with Aspirus Keweenaw. To the extent the Employer argues that

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8 See https://www.alleghenycounty.us/Health-Department/Resources/COVID-19/COVID-19-Dashboards.aspx (last viewed June 22, 2022), noting that while other data dashboards are updated daily, the relevant COVID-19 Summary dashboard is updated weekly.

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the Board should abandon its test from *Aspirus Keweenaw*, and that manual elections are more accurate and fair,\(^\text{11}\) these are strictly policy arguments best directed to the Board. I am obligated to apply the Board’s decisions, and I have done so here in directing a mail ballot election.\(^\text{12}\)

Apart from the appropriateness of a mail-ballot election under the currently controlling *Aspirus Keweenaw* test, with regard to the appropriateness of a mail ballot election under *San Diego Gas and Electric*, where employees are scattered in terms of their work schedules, the Board has found mail ballots appropriate. *M & N Mail Service, Inc.*, 326 NLRB 451 (1998) (mail ballot election appropriate where drivers have a staggered work schedule and may not be scheduled to work or available to participate in an election). Here, Attachment B of the Employer’s initial position statement, filed on June 2, 2022, provided only that employees at the Liberty and Baum Store worked “variable” schedules. In that regard, while schedules for the store are generally morning shift (4:30 a.m.-11:30 a.m.); mid-dav shift (9:30 a.m.- 4:30 p.m.); and (3) closing shift (4:30 p.m.-9:30 p.m.) and these shift hours remain constant, employees nonetheless work different and varying shifts each week. Neither party has provided any information regarding employee schedules more specific than this. Therefore, and also considering that a number of employees at the Liberty and Baum Store work part-time, I further conclude that the Liberty and Baum Store bargaining unit employees’ schedules are scattered in scheduling time as described in *San Diego Gas*, and a mail-ballot election is also warranted under such criteria.

II. **CONCLUSION**

Based on the entire record in this matter and in accordance with the discussion above, I conclude and find as follows:

1. The hearing officer’s rulings made at the hearing are free from prejudicial error and are hereby affirmed.

2. The parties stipulated, and I find that the Employer is an employer engaged in commerce within the meaning of Section 2(6) and (7) of the National Labor Relations Act and is subject to the jurisdiction of the Board, and it will effectuate the purposes of the Act to assert jurisdiction herein.\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^{11}\) This includes the Employer’s argument of low voter turnout in recent mail-ballot elections.

\(^{12}\) To the extent the Employer asserts that Regions have directed manual elections in other single-store elections in some of its other stores around the United States, I note that the facts in those cases are distinguishable from the instant case. In the Regional Director’s Decision and Direction of Election in Case 12-CA-291975, issued April 13, 2022, it was noted—at page 4—that “[n]either party contends that the Covid-19 levels are a reason to hold a mail ballot election” and accordingly the Regional Director analyzed the facts of that case solely under *San Diego Gas*. Similarly, in Case 06-RC-295875, the Petition in that case—filed May 16, 2022—indicates that the Petitioner in that case was seeking a manual election. Here, in contrast, the Petitioner is seeking a mail-ballot election specifically because of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

\(^{13}\) The parties stipulated to the following commerce facts:

The Employer, Starbucks Corporation, a Washington corporation with headquarters located in Seattle, Washington, and facilities located throughout the United States, including a facility located at 5310 Liberty Ave., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is engaged in the retail operation of restaurants. During the past twelve months, a representative period
3. The parties stipulated, and I find that Petitioner is a labor organization within the meaning of Section 2(5) of Act. The Petitioner claims to represent the employees in the unit described in the petition herein and the Employer declines to recognize the Petitioner.

4. The parties stipulated, and I find that there is no collective-bargaining agreement covering any of the employees in the unit sought in the petition herein, and there is no contract bar to this proceeding or other bar in existence that would preclude the processing of the petition.

5. A question affecting commerce exists concerning the representation of certain employees of the Employer within the meaning of Section 9(c)(1) and 2(6) and (7) of the Act.

6. The following employees of the Employer constitute a unit appropriate for the purposes of collective bargaining within the meaning of Section 9(b) of the Act:

   INCLUDED: All full-time and regular part-time Baristas and Shift Supervisors employed at the Employer’s facility located at 5310 Liberty Ave., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15224 (Store 7625 referred to as "Liberty and Baum Store")

   EXCLUDED: All Store Managers, office clerical employees, and guards, and professional employees and supervisors as defined by the Act, and all other employees.

   Others permitted to vote: The parties have agreed that the Assistant Store Manager may vote in the election, but their ballots will be challenged since their eligibility has not been resolved. No decision has been made regarding whether the individuals in these classifications or groups are included in, or excluded from, the bargaining unit. The eligibility or inclusion of these individuals will be resolved, if necessary, following the election.

III. DIRECTION OF ELECTION

   The National Labor Relations Board will conduct a secret ballot election among the employees in the unit found appropriate above. Employees will vote whether or not they wish to be represented for purposes of collective bargaining by Workers United affiliated with Service Employees International Union.

   A. Election Details

   The election will be conducted by mail. On June 30, 2022, the ballots will be mailed to voters by a designated official from the National Labor Relations Board, Region 6. Voters must sign the outside of the envelope in which the ballot is returned. Any ballot received in an envelope that is not signed will be automatically void.

of time, the Employer derived gross revenues in excess of $500,000 and purchased and received goods valued in excess of $50,000 directly from points outside the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.
Those employees who believe that they are eligible to vote and did not receive a ballot in the mail by **July 7, 2022**, should communicate immediately with the National Labor Relations Board by either calling the Region 6 Office at **412-395-4400** or our national toll-free line at **1-844-762-NLRB (1-844-762-6572)**.

Voters must return their mail ballots so that they will be received in the National Labor Relations Board, Region 6 office prior to the count on **July 26, 2022**. All ballots will be commingled and counted by an agent of Region 6 of the National Labor Relations Board on **July 26, 2022, at 11:00 a.m.** with participants being present via electronic means. No party may make a video or audio recording or save any image of the ballot count. If, at a later date, it is determined that a ballot count can be safely held in the Regional Office, the Region will inform the parties with sufficient notice so that they may attend.

**B. Voting Eligibility**

Eligible to vote are those in the unit who were employed during the payroll period ending **June 12, 2022**, including employees who did not work during that period because they were ill, on vacation, or temporarily laid off. In a mail ballot election, employees are eligible to vote if they are in the unit on both the payroll period ending date and on the date they mail in their ballots to the Board’s designated office.

Also eligible to vote are all employees in the unit who have worked an average of four (4) hours or more per week during the 13 weeks immediately preceding the eligibility date for the election. The parties stipulated to use of this formula, as set forth in *Davison-Paxon Co.*, 185 NLRB 21, 23-24 (1970), to determine voter eligibility.

Employees engaged in an economic strike, who have retained their status as strikers and who have not been permanently replaced, are also eligible to vote. In addition, in an economic strike that commenced less than 12 months before the election date, employees engaged in such strike who have retained their status as strikers but who have been permanently replaced, as well as their replacements, are eligible to vote. Unit employees in the military services of the United States may vote by mail as directed above.

Ineligible to vote are (1) employees who have quit or been discharged for cause since the designated payroll period, and, in a mail ballot election, before they mail in their ballots to the Board’s designated office; (2) striking employees who have been discharged for cause since the strike began and who have not been rehired or reinstated before the election date; and (3) employees who are engaged in an economic strike that began more than 12 months before the election date and who have been permanently replaced.

**C. Voter List**

As required by Section 102.67(l) of the Board’s Rules and Regulations, the Employer must provide the Regional Director and parties named in this decision a list of the full names, work locations, shifts, job classifications, and contact information (including home addresses, available
personal email addresses, and available home and personal cell telephone numbers) of all eligible voters.

To be timely filed and served, the list must be received by the regional director and the parties by June 27, 2022. The list must be accompanied by a certificate of service showing service on all parties. The region will no longer serve the voter list.

Unless the Employer certifies that it does not possess the capacity to produce the list in the required form, the list must be provided in a table in a Microsoft Word file (.doc or docx) or a file that is compatible with Microsoft Word (.doc or docx). The first column of the list must begin with each employee’s last name and the list must be alphabetized (overall or by department) by last name. Because the list will be used during the election, the font size of the list must be the equivalent of Times New Roman 10 or larger. That font does not need to be used but the font must be that size or larger. A sample, optional form for the list is provided on the NLRB website at www.nlrb.gov/what-we-do/conduct-elections/representation-case-rules-effective-april-14-2015.

When feasible, the list shall be filed electronically with the Region and served electronically on the other parties named in this decision. The list may be electronically filed with the Region by using the E-filing system on the Agency’s website at www.nlrb.gov. Once the website is accessed, click on E-File Documents, enter the NLRB Case Number, and follow the detailed instructions.

Failure to comply with the above requirements will be grounds for setting aside the election whenever proper and timely objections are filed. However, the Employer may not object to the failure to file or serve the list within the specified time or in the proper format if it is responsible for the failure.

No party shall use the voter list for purposes other than the representation proceeding, Board proceedings arising from it, and related matters.

D. Posting of Notices of Election

Pursuant to Section 102.67(k) of the Board’s Rules, the Employer must post copies of the Notice of Election accompanying this Decision in conspicuous places, including all places where notices to employees in the unit found appropriate are customarily posted. The Notice must be posted so all pages of the Notice are simultaneously visible. In addition, if the Employer customarily communicates electronically with some or all of the employees in the unit found appropriate, the Employer must also distribute the Notice of Election electronically to those employees. The Employer must post copies of the Notice at least 3 full working days prior to 12:01 a.m. of the day of the election and copies must remain posted until the end of the election. For purposes of posting, working day means an entire 24-hour period excluding Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays. However, a party shall be estopped from objecting to the nonposting of notices if it is responsible for the nonposting, and likewise shall be estopped from objecting to the nondistribution of notices if it is responsible for the nondistribution.

14 The Petitioner has agreed to waive the entire 10-day period it is permitted to receive the voting list prior to the opening of the polling period.
Failure to follow the posting requirements set forth above will be grounds for setting aside the election if proper and timely objections are filed.

IV. RIGHT TO REQUEST REVIEW

Pursuant to Section 102.67 of the Board’s Rules and Regulations, a request for review may be filed with the Board at any time following the issuance of this Decision until 10 business days after a final disposition of the proceeding by the Regional Director. Accordingly, a party is not precluded from filing a request for review of this decision after the election on the grounds that it did not file a request for review of this Decision prior to the election. The request for review must conform to the requirements of Section 102.67 of the Board’s Rules and Regulations.

A request for review must be E-Filed through the Agency’s website and may not be filed by facsimile. To E-File the request for review, go to www.nlrb.gov, select E-File Documents, enter the NLRB Case Number, and follow the detailed instructions. If not E-Filed, the request for review should be addressed to the Executive Secretary, National Labor Relations Board, 1015 Half Street SE, Washington, DC 20570-0001, and must be accompanied by a statement explaining the circumstances concerning not having access to the Agency’s E-Filing system or why filing electronically would impose an undue burden. A party filing a request for review must serve a copy of the request on the other parties and file a copy with the Regional Director. A certificate of service must be filed with the Board together with the request for review.

Neither the filing of a request for review nor the Board’s granting a request for review will stay the election in this matter unless specifically ordered by the Board. If a request for review of a pre-election decision and direction of election is filed within 10 business days after issuance of the decision and if the Board has not already ruled on the request and therefore the issue under review remains unresolved, all ballots will be impounded. Nonetheless, parties retain the right to file a request for review at any subsequent time until 10 business days following final disposition of the proceeding, but without automatic impoundment of ballots.

Dated: June 23, 2022.

/s/ Nancy Wilson
NANCY WILSON
REGIONAL DIRECTOR
NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS BOARD
REGION 06
1000 Liberty Ave Rm 904
Pittsburgh, PA 15222-4111