

National Unions are broken; the Amazon Labor Union shows us how to fix them.

May 1st, 2022



President Biden meets with union organizers | Image: White House via Twitter

“We want to thank Jeff Bezos for going to space,” said Chris Smalls, the president and lead organizer of the Amazon Labor Union, “Because when he was up there, we was signing people up.” (Briquelet & Weill, 2022). Once thought impossible, the JFK8 Staten Island Amazon warehouse workers stood up to the retail giant and voted to unionize. Chris Smalls was the spark that lit the fire: The Amazon Labor Union, an independent grassroots effort, won a historic

victory against America's second-largest employer. Jeff Bezos may have gone into space, but on the ground, Chris Smalls and his fellow warehouse workers led a movement for human dignity and justice.

The victory comes after two years of protesting and organizing by Chris Smalls and other warehouse workers, protesting the unsafe conditions during the pandemic. Amazon fired Smalls after organizing a protest to try and get the warehouse to pause operations due to rising infections within the facility (Weise, 2022). The ALU strategy prioritized bottom-up organizing, building community, and gaining dignity and respect. Organizers set up a tent at the nearby bus stop and would host bonfires, make TikTok videos with their co-workers at the warehouse, and sign everyone up they could. The campaign would engage workers in improving wages and working conditions and central questions like civil rights and environmental justice (Bogage et al., 2022). The organizers could fend off the stereotype of the overly bureaucratic third-party group because the union was a group of enthusiastic coworkers fighting for dignity and justice. The ALU's bottom-up organizing paid off at the time of the election — the ALU won 2,654 votes to 2,131.

**“Whatever it
took to get even
one person, we
were doing it.”
- Chris Smalls**

This win follows a recent string of successful unionization efforts across the U.S. in areas not typically unionized. In recent months workers from Starbucks stores across the U.S. have successfully unionized (Molla, 2022). There's good reason to believe this surge of energy indicates a broader trend in the U.S. towards unionization. The U.S. public is more supportive of unions than it has since the 60s (Brenan, 2021), with 68% of Americans supporting unions, and even more significant: 48% of workers want to be represented by a union (Kochan et al., 2019)

Unfortunately, the national unions representing most unionized workers haven't been able to translate this energy into the raw numbers. In 2021, the number of U.S. workers

represented by unions continued its long decline (*Union Members - 2021, 2022*). At their peak, Unions represented 35.7% of the American workforce, but that number has steadily eroded after decades of aggressive anti-union campaigns and hostile legislation (Mishel et al., 2020). Fighting this trend requires bringing millions of new workers into the union movement, yet national unions have stepped away from organizing. A leaked AFL-CIO budget from 2019 shows that the AFL-CIO spent \$40.6 million on political projects and only \$5 million on organizing (Nolan, 2019). The decline in organizing is clear: in 1950, 1.81% of workers were in a representation election each year, but now that number is only 0.1%(Mishel et al., 2020). To rebuild unionism in the United States, national unions must focus on building a more expansive unionist movement rooted in bottom-up organizing.

National Unions in the United States primarily operate through a service-based model of unionism. Like an insurance company, workers pay dues to the union, and in exchange, unions do collective bargaining, grievance handling, and advocate for union rights in the political sphere (Fiorito et al., 1995, 616). Within the service model, the rank-and-file support and loyalty to a union depend on how internal workers perceive their union is helping them (Fiorito et al., 1995, 628). Quality services may satisfy workers in the short term but do little to draw outsiders to join. Moreover, many collective bargaining negotiations take place away from the rank-and-file, further alienating them from their very own representatives. Studies have found that high-quality servicing has little impact on organizing success, likely because these services aren't perceived by outsiders who might join the union (Fiorito et al., 1995, 628). Furthermore, these services often aren't even seen by workers *within the union*. Collective bargaining negotiations are often secretive and far from the worker (Mcalevey, 2016, 3). Thus service-based unions often face the problem of workers becoming disengaged from the union.

This wasn't always the case. During the Great Depression, unions organized millions of people through their decentralized, grassroots efforts. Organizations such as the CIO became a beacon of social justice and solidarity, unifying workers into a movement for higher wages

through striking and sympathy striking. Unions represent nearly a million new workers yearly (Mishel et al., 2020). If the same trend were true today, that would mean that a population the size of the entire Chicago Metroland area would be joining a union every single year. Unions like the CIO fostered a culture of solidarity, in which unionism wasn't just a way to raise wages but a social justice movement (Voss and Fantasia 42). The CIO organized millions of people through largely decentralized grassroots efforts across the U.S.(Forman, 2013). These unions facilitated secondary strikes and sympathy strikes supporting other workers across the U.S.

The passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 dealt a mortal blow to America's labor unions. The legislation eviscerated traditional organizing tactics, centralizing leadership and diminishing union power. The Act effectively banned most forms of solidarity tactics that the Unions had relied upon and formalized a distance between union leaders and the rank-and-file (Voss and Fantasia 45). The act banned secondary and sympathy strikes, encouraging individualized unionism instead. Wildcat strikes were effectively discouraged thanks to repercussions for union leaders, and a number of reforms made it easier for strikebreakers to sue unions for decertification. In this way, the Taft-Hartley Act ushered in an era of service-based unionism indicative of a highly bureaucratic process and automatic dues deductions from paychecks (Voss and Fantasia 50). Today, much of what the AFL-CIO does is draft legislation, donate money to politicians, and represent its members in court. National unions have limited resources, lack a deep understanding of their own members, and are disconnected from local power struggles. This form of unionism has effectively silenced the working-class front by diminishing its power.

The Staten Island warehouse wasn't the first Amazon warehouse to attempt to unionize. The Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU) tried to unionize a similar warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama. This effort was characteristic of the top-down, service-based approach to unionizing, where a big union came in and tried to get their workers to unionize. The RWDSU was an outside group and appears to have embraced it. In their messaging, the

Bessemer organizers used slogans like “The Union is on your side” (McAlevy, 2021), depicting the union as a third party external to the workers the union sought to support. When Amazon tried to paint the ALU as a third-party group, it had the credibility and the support to fend off the attack (Barbaro et al., 2022). It remains unclear how much of the union drive's energy was from the Amazon workers and how much was from the media and RWDSU. Certainly, an aspect of the loss was Amazon's union-busting efforts. Amazon has an anti-union budget of over \$4.2 million (Scheiber, 2022). The RWDSU was granted a second election after the NLRB decided that Amazon had unfairly interfered with the Union, and their second vote was far closer but ultimately lost as well.

National Unions must learn from Bessemer's failure and Staten Island's victory. The ALU's organizing model of unionism isn't new in the U.S.; in 2000, the AFL-CIO attempted to shift towards organizing. The rapidly declining unionization rate lit a fire under national unions, and they attempted to switch to an organizing model. The AFL-CIO pledged 30% of its budget towards organizing and encouraged its member unions to do the same. This change didn't last, as few member unions actually hit their targets, and the AFL-CIO gradually shifted back to service unionism (Forman, 2013). There are signs of a shift again. The AFL-CIO's new president Liz Shuler seems much more open to an organizing model once again.

The pandemic has bare the naked inequality that pervades our modern American workplaces. Now more than ever, unions have a chance to deliver gracious retribution to workers, providing them the increased control over the conditions they deserve. While corporations amass record profits, wages remain stagnant, and inflation continues to erode workers' salaries. Unions can fight the growing inequality in the U.S. by giving workers greater control over their workplace (*Unions Help Reduce Disparities and Strengthen Our Democracy*, 2021). The ALU's victory should serve as a calling point for other unions to shift back towards an organizing model to increase and protect unionization rates. We must reject the inhuman disparities in our society and instead come together in collective action and unity.

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