New Organizing Models: Grassroots to Global

Teamsters Confront Amazon: An Early Assessment

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We live in the age of “Amazon capitalism,” a concentration of corporate power and influence over the global economy on a scale not seen before, marked by several new ways of operating, and major problems related to workers, consumers, economies, and communities.1 Amazon’s rapidly growing influence over the world’s economy was accelerated during the pandemic. Along with the corporation’s massive profit generator, Amazon Web Services (AWS), which provides cloud computing, data storage, and related electronic services and applications, its e-commerce operations and Amazon Prime program continue to grow in popularity, with its offer of expedited “free shipping” of a wide variety of goods to one’s doorstep with the mere click of a finger. Amazon’s growth in sales also peaked during the pandemic, surpassing the total sales of Walmart, with consumers spending $610 billion between June 2020 and June 2021. Amazon is now the world’s fifth largest company, with its largest consumer market in the United States.2

Yet, while shipping is free and convenient for Amazon Prime members, Amazon’s e-commerce retail and logistics business has taken a toll on its rapidly growing blue-collar workforce of warehouse and delivery workers, who are underpaid, work long hours, are electronically surveilled, subject to speed-up,3 and experience higher rates of serious injury and turnover than the U.S. warehouse industry average.4 No wonder Amazon workers are increasingly organizing both internationally and in the United States, and gaining the interest of unions.

In providing an overview and assessment of the Teamsters’ new organizing campaign targeting Amazon in the United States, we focus on its efforts to mobilize workers and community members. We recognize that these efforts have only just begun and are part of the Teamsters’ broader multifaceted strategy, which also includes legal and national policy strategies, shifting the narrative about Amazon in the media, and efforts to organize Amazon workers in other countries, such as Canada. Nevertheless, the Teamsters’ efforts to engage their own rank-and-file members, non-union workers in warehousing and delivery, and community members, are particularly promising developments that could help to counter corporate dominance in general and the rising specter of Amazon in particular.

Why Amazon?

Interest in organizing Amazon’s warehouse and delivery workers has grown within the U.S. labor movement for at least three reasons beyond a strong desire for worker justice. First, Amazon’s workforce has quickly become immense. By late 2021, Amazon’s global workforce soared to over 1.6 million direct employees,5 making Amazon the second largest private U.S. employer behind Walmart. Amazon’s workforce is even larger if we consider its massive subcontracted and contingent last-mile delivery workforce,6 which amounts to at least 500,000 indirect workers.7 In order to compete

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with United Parcel Service (UPS), FedEx, and the U.S. Postal Service, Amazon has invested heavily in building its own subcontracted and contingent delivery workforce. The majority of Amazon’s delivery drivers work for Delivery Service Partners (DSPs), not Amazon, despite the fact that these workers drive Amazon branded vans, wear Amazon uniforms, and are surveilled by Amazon’s delivery software system. DSPs are limited in size to twenty to forty vans, which makes these workers very difficult to unionize. Today, the majority of Amazon Prime packages are now delivered by these subcontracted DSP drivers, which has indirectly impacted unionized UPS drivers and United States Postal Service workers. In addition to DSPs, Amazon deliveries are also handled by Amazon Flex drivers. These contingent drivers are gig workers, similar to Uber drivers, as they use their own vehicles to deliver Amazon packages on a contingent basis. Black and Latina/o workers comprise the majority of Amazon’s blue-collar workforces in both warehousing and last-mile delivery. While mostly native born, many of these workers are immigrants of color.

In order to compete with United Parcel Service, FedEx, and the U.S. Postal Service, Amazon has invested heavily in building its own subcontracted and contingent delivery workforce.

Second, even prior to the pandemic, Amazon’s growing number of blue-collar workers were organizing in various cities in the United States and winning concessions, joining unionized European workers in the growing global worker resistance movement to Amazon, and proving to the U.S. labor movement the promise of reinvigorating worker organizing.

Third, the Teamsters have a long history of unionizing and winning good union contracts for logistics workers in warehousing and delivery transportation in the United States and other nations. Currently, Teamsters members include many warehouse workers as well as transportation workers involved in delivering packages, freight, and food by air and ground by companies such as UPS and DHL. These Teamster members faced the growing threat of job loss and the deterioration of their working conditions as Amazon’s non-union logistics operations in warehousing and transportation expanded. As these unionized package delivery workers began to deliver more packages for Amazon and struggled to compete with Amazon’s non-union delivery workforce, they experienced increased pressure to work during holidays and weekends and more variable work schedules. Unionized delivery drivers also observed an increase in temporary and contract workers, which was driving down wages and benefits in the delivery workforce.

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All of these developments increased the Teamsters’ interest in organizing against Amazon. There were also internal political shifts underway within the Teamsters union and beyond to revitalize the U.S. labor movement to better confront non-union companies, particularly Amazon, through direct action, member mobilization, and even supporting independent efforts to organize Amazon workers, breaking away from more traditional, business models of unionization. At its annual convention in June 2021, representatives from about 500 Teamsters locals voted for a special resolution, described more fully below, to ramp up and invest new resources in its campaign against Amazon, which it had begun as early as 2016. In March of 2022, the Teamsters elected a new president, Sean O’Brien, who vowed to step up efforts to help to organize Amazon workers through worker-to-worker organizing and other tactics.

Confronting Amazon is a daunting task. The company has openly criticized unions and engaged in illegal employer retaliation and surveillance against warehouse workers when they engaged in unionization drives in Bessemer, Alabama, and Staten Island (in New York City), as well as direct action campaigns in other U.S. cities and states. Amazon’s union-busting activities and its “freedom of association”
policy fail to meet international labor standards despite Amazon’s claims of compliance. In addition, workforce turnover is very high among Amazon warehouse workers, while many of its delivery drivers are subcontracted. Despite these challenges and the weakness of U.S. labor laws, worker-led organizing is possible in the United States, demonstrated by the success of direct actions by Amazon workers, including those organized through Amazonians United—a militant, independent worker organization engaged in organizing the shopfloor and building worker power in Amazon warehouses—in Chicago, Sacramento, New York City, and Upper Marlboro, Maryland among other places—and the recent successful unionization campaign by the grassroots labor union Amazon Labor Union (ALU) in Staten Island. (ALU was founded by former Amazon worker, Christian Smalls. On April 1, 2022, Amazon warehouse workers in Staten Island JFK8 affirmatively voted for union recognition by the ALU, becoming the first Amazon warehouse in the United States to officially be recognized by the National Labor Relations Board.) Although the Teamsters’ organizing efforts around Amazon—also called the Amazon Project—has just officially begun, there has been a great deal of initial strategic work done by the union in recent years. While not widely publicized, they have supported independent efforts to organize Amazon workers even while engaging their own membership and collaborating with local community organizations to build power and capacity locally and regionally in order to counter Amazon’s increasing dominance within many communities and local politics.

The Teamsters’ Amazon Project

The special resolution adopted at the Teamsters 2021 annual convention declared that “building worker power at Amazon and helping [them] achieve a union contract” was a top priority. The Teamsters’ efforts to support Amazon worker organizing is in its early stages and has taken various forms across its local chapters over the past few years. Some of the more advanced organizing work has been under the direction of the Teamsters’ Strategic Campaigns Department—which is broader and older than the newly formed Amazon Division—and, since 2021, its Amazon Division, focusing on key regions throughout Amazon’s supply chains, or choke points, such the Northeast and Southern California’s Inland Empire region, where some of the largest concentrations of U.S. Amazon

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The Teamsters’ resolution endorsed a militant and multifaceted approach to organizing in response to Amazon, recalling that its own union power had historically required “shop-floor strikes, city-wide strikes, and actions in the streets.” The resolution called upon all levels of the union to unite and support engaging its members, workers, and the community; it also called for promoting policy reforms, improving the enforcement of antitrust laws, and engaging in global solidarity actions. Instead of only emphasizing traditional National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) union organizing campaigns, the Teamsters embraced “building genuine worker power at Amazon” through “shop-floor militancy by Amazon workers” as well as “unquestioned solidarity from warehousing and delivery Teamsters,” as stated in its resolution. While calling for a unified approach, the resolution also acknowledged geographic variation in Amazon’s impact and the role of “regional partnerships with Local Unions, Joint Councils, and the International,” in implementing its Amazon Project. In practice, the specific goals of the Amazon Project have been dynamic and differed across location and over time in response to variable conditions and partnerships.
warehouses are located. Organizers working in the Strategic Campaigns Department have been involved in the ground game, trying to build up organization within various Amazon facilities, developing community coalitions, and partnering and working with worker-led organizations, such as Amazonians United.

An emerging trend in the implementation of the Amazon Project is for Teamsters locals to form voluntary Amazon organizing committees to support organizing efforts by rank-and-file Amazon warehouse workers. Throughout the United States, Teamsters’ members have been reaching out to non-union Amazon warehouse workers and drivers to talk to them directly about their working conditions, the benefits of unionization, to encourage them to form their own worker organizing committees at their workplaces, and sometimes even supporting unionization campaigns by other unions, such as the ALU in Staten Island. Approaching workers when they are off-duty, such as when eating at local doughnut shops or fast food restaurants, has encouraged Amazon warehouse workers and Amazon Prime delivery drivers to take action with their fellow workers to improve their working conditions. Teamsters members often know other workers employed in the logistics industry through their personal and family networks as well as through previous jobs they have held, especially in communities that are logistics hubs.

The Teamsters and their members have supported worker-led actions by Amazon workers at their workplaces when and where they do emerge. Direct actions, including walkouts and protests, and legal complaints by Amazon warehouse workers, already on the rise in various locations in the United States, rose to new heights during the Covid-19 pandemic. Such actions have been spearheaded by various groups, including worker-led independent organizations, such as Amazonians United, as well as unions and worker centers such as the Warehouse Worker Resource Center, and resulted in various improvements in health and safety and other working conditions at the facilities where workers organized. Through their Amazon Project, the Teamsters have also supported independent worker-led unionization campaigns, such as the ALU in Staten Island, which won the very first successful union election among Amazon warehouse workers in the United States, in early 2022. ALU’s organizing drive took place at the JFK8 facility in Staten Island, New York, where, out of 8,325 workers eligible to vote, 2,654 voted in favor of the union, while 2,131 voted against it. Like the workforce at that JFK8 facility, the organizing committee, led by Angelika Maldonado, a woman of color and single mother, was very diverse and included many workers of color, including immigrants of color. Rank-and-file workers organized during lunch and other breaks and approached fellow workers coming and leaving from various shifts. They communicated with fellow employees by phone, group chats, and other forms of social media during non-working hours in multiple languages given the ethnic diversity of its immigrant workforce. Trust and camaraderie among workers was built through one-on-one conversations and shared meals featuring foods popular among its diverse workforce, such as African rice. As the members of the group grew in number and gained confidence, many began to wear their ALU T-shirts to the facility. Worker activists also openly disagreed with the corporation’s anti-union propaganda during mandatory company meetings, which helped to reduce their influence among workers.

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After ALU’s successful unionization drive, the Teamsters’ newest president, Sean O’Brien, met with ALU’s president, Christian Smalls, as did leaders of several other major unions, and pledged financial, legal, research, and other support for ALU’s effort to win another union election at a second facility in Staten Island. Members of Teamsters Local 804 in New York also volunteered their time and energy to assist the organizing campaign, while Teamsters members have made an effort to learn from the experience of ALU organizers through a national webinar organized by Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), a group of Teamsters
seeking to transform the union. In addition, O’Brien emphasized the importance of worker-to-worker organizing and building solidarity with community groups and local politicians for non-traditional pressure campaigns in the effort to organize and support Amazon workers. Although the ALU has so far still maintained its independence from the Teamsters and other unions, it has appreciated their support and solidarity. We spoke with Anthony Rosario, a Teamsters member for the past 28 years, a former shop steward for Local 804, who is now an organizer for the Teamsters based in Long Island, New York. Rosario sees value in the Teamsters supporting independent unions and wants to “do everything we can to support [Amazon workers] through whatever union.” He emphasized the need to increase union density to protect workers and improve their working conditions. As he put it, “Workers need a comeback.”

Building Power beyond the Workplace: Policy and Political Change

Another key part of the Teamsters’ grassroots strategy is to push for policy changes to curb the unfettered expansion of Amazon. In addition to pushing state and national policymakers to improve and step up the enforcement of antitrust laws, the Teamsters have also engaged in local-level campaigns that have already been effective in slowing the expansion of Amazon warehouse construction. In part, this latter strategy can be understood as defensive in orientation, since the tremendous expansion of Amazon’s logistics operations poses a competitive threat to the jobs of Teamster-organized delivery drivers. And many Teamster members are also local residents who, like other members of their communities, are concerned that new warehouse facilities, often concentrated in low-income communities of color, will simply add more noise, traffic, and air pollution to surrounding neighborhoods. Yet, this strategy can also be understood as a way to proactively build power within working-class communities of color and ensure that local policymakers are doing more to promote economic development policies that are just and environmentally sustainable. In addition to mobilizing its rank-and-file union members for these local policy campaigns, the Teamsters have helped to build broader local labor-community coalitions, sometimes involving blue-green alliances, with groups such as the Sierra Club and the People’s Collective for Environmental Justice, around good jobs and environmental justice, and mobilized local residents through neighborhood canvassing.

In addition to [supporting] local policy campaigns, the Teamsters have helped to build . . . labor-community coalitions . . . around good jobs and environmental justice . . .

Although the outcomes of these campaigns have varied, reflecting differences in the character of local politics, the Teamsters and their allies have won an impressive series of local policy victories. Some of these victories are merely symbolic, but nonetheless helpful for building alliances with local policymakers. For example, in Boston and 11 surrounding municipalities, local politicians, in response to Teamsters’ demands, adopted non-binding resolutions that call upon Amazon to protect labor standards and to meet with community and labor groups if and when it expands. In other places, the Teamsters and their allies have successfully blocked Amazon’s expansion. For example, Teamsters members, local residents, and their community allies persuaded city councils in Arvada, Colorado, and Oceanside, California to reject proposed new Amazon facilities in 2021, citing concerns about the low wages and bad working conditions that Amazon would provide to warehouse workers and delivery drivers as well as how the project would exacerbate environmental and health problems associated with increased air pollution and traffic congestion. In San Diego, Amazon backed out of a potential warehouse site in El Cajon that was actively opposed by the Teamsters after local elected officials considered adopting a protective labor policy that would require
employers in San Diego County to pay the prevailing (union) wage and provide at least 56 hours of annual sick leave for workers. In Fort Wayne, Indiana, Teamsters members and their allies were able to persuade the city council to reject Amazon’s request for additional tax abatements for an approved new warehouse.

The Teamsters’ contract with UPS expire[s] in 2023, and UPS employees expect employer demands for concessionary bargaining amid the continued market expansion of Amazon. The future of the Teamsters union at stake.

Later that year, Teamsters joined community activists in West Covina, California, in opposing the proposed construction of an Amazon facility that was expected to bring over 900 additional vehicle trips into local neighborhoods. As they did in other cities, local residents, Teamster members, and community allies collected petitions and engaged in door-to-door canvassing to alert local residents of the proposed facility and its likely impacts on local neighborhoods. They also urged city council members to reject plans for the new facility. After local politicians initially approved the project, Teamsters members and their community allies carried out a lively community picket at the construction site. Several Teamsters locals and allied community and environmental justice organizations also challenged the project by filing a California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) lawsuit against the developer and the city. The lawsuit was eventually settled with the developer, who agreed to mitigate the environmental impacts of the project by using more renewable energy sources and to better protect local residents from increased traffic, noise, and sound pollution related to the new facility. Afterward, and likely in response to this, Amazon withdrew from the site.

The Teamsters and their allies have also successfully promoted the adoption of temporary moratoriums on warehouse developments by various California city councils, especially where heavy concentrations of Amazon and other warehouses have exacerbated traffic congestion and air pollution.

Nationally and at the state level, the Teamsters have pushed for greater regulation of labor conditions in the warehouse sector through legislation and labor law enforcement. Along with members of the broader California labor movement, the Teamsters actively supported the passage of California AB 701. This law, the first of its kind in the nation, provides warehouse workers with explicit protections against work quotas and electronic surveillance that lead to violations in health and safety laws, and against employer retaliation for organizing around that issue. The Teamsters have also been active in political work at the national and state level related to congressional anti-trust activity in order to confront Amazon’s growing monopoly power and monopolistic practices. Dan Gross, a UPS driver and Teamsters Local 177 member, testified to House members:

My union has provided that collective voice at UPS for nearly a hundred years. Unfortunately, our standards and those of the hundreds of thousands of United States Postal Service workers are also under attack by a new type of company, a company that uses its dominant presence in e-commerce to exert power over its contractors and its workers. The threat to the industry I work for is Amazon.

The Teamsters have been active in New York building political coalitions in an attempt to pass the “Twenty-first Century Antitrust Act,” which would expand and update New York’s antitrust laws in order to hold massive corporations like Amazon accountable.

The Importance of Supporting Worker-Led Organizing in Logistics

Much like the inspiring ALU victory in Staten Island, which was years in the making and followed several major setbacks, the Teamsters’ Amazon Project, still in its early stages, could bear fruit. Already, grassroots worker-led initiatives, including “militant minority” direct
action organizing have been very successful in engaging workers and building leadership locally among Amazon workers. For this reason, it remains important that the Teamsters (and other established unions) continue to support independent, worker-led organizing efforts across the logistics sector. Rather than implementing a top-down, one-size-fits-all organizing strategy, the Teamsters have also successfully used a “distributive organizing model” that acknowledges the autonomy of emerging Amazon worker leaders, union locals, and grassroots social movements, and the need to respond to varying and dynamic circumstances on the ground. The Teamsters’ Amazon Project has involved educating and mobilizing their members and leaders to work in coalition with other community organizations and local residents to block the expansion of Amazon, limit its public subsidies, and to demand more protections for workers and residents from policymakers in ways that make sense given how political and legal contexts vary considerably across the country.

Randy Korgan, Teamsters’ National Director for Amazon, says “No company is more powerful than workers who are united and standing together, with their communities, in solidarity.” The Teamsters’ interest in helping to organize and support Amazon workers reflects not only a strong sense of worker solidarity, but also a recognition that unionized workers in the delivery sector will need all the support they can get to continue to set high labor standards in the logistics industry. The Teamsters’ union contract with UPS is set to expire in 2023, and UPS employees expect that they are likely to confront employer demands for concessionary bargaining amid the continued market expansion of Amazon. Teamsters’ leaders, rank-and-file members, and their allies are already preparing for this contract fight, with the future of the Teamsters union at stake. Their success at the bargaining table with UPS would not only help to maintain good labor standards within the logistics industry, but also show workers, both within and beyond Amazon, the benefits of unionization. After all, the UPS contract covers about 340,000 employees and is the “largest private-sector collective bargaining agreement in North America,” according to the Teamsters. The upcoming UPS contract fight presents not only the biggest immediate challenge for the Teamsters, but also an important opportunity for workers at UPS, Amazon, and within the entire logistics industry to unite and support one another in the larger struggle for workers’ rights and good working conditions within the industry.

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