

Organizing Big Tech

By Sarah Jaffe





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A supporter of the RWDSU unionization effort takes a photo of the RWDSU union rep standing with other supporters outside the Amazon fulfillment warehouse at the center of a unionization drive on March 29, 2021 in Bessemer, Alabama. (Photo by Elijah Nouvelage/Getty Images)

Introduction

The “tech” sector occupies a central place in American capitalism in 2021, and for good reason.

As Logic magazine editor Ben Tarnoff notes, “Tech is an oasis of profitability in an era of stagnation. For this reason, it also serves a valuable ideological function.”¹

But what do companies like Google, Amazon, and Tesla have in common, really? One began as a search engine; another, an online bookstore; the third an electric car maker. Today, the tech sector touches all aspects of our lives, and there is not a clear answer as to what constitutes “tech”. Tech trades on its novelty, its new-ness, to tell us that it is a sector that we

¹ Tarnoff, Ben. “The Making of the Tech Worker Movement,” Logic, May 4, 2020 logicmag.io/the-making-of-the-tech-worker-movement/full-text/

outsiders simply can't understand, that we should leave it to the experts. Its lack of unions is explained as a condition of that novelty and innovation, rather than a strategy for worker control that dates back before Fordism. Tech workers are told they are not workers at all, but it is precisely the breadth of these companies that proves this is a lie: after all, warehouse workers and autoworkers have long been unionized, and they too fall within the umbrella of "tech" these days.

It is now the question of whether, and how, tech workers will organize that has drawn so much attention of late. From the Google walk out in 2018 to the union vote among Amazon warehouse workers in Alabama this past March, there has been a growing movement to organize the diverse tech sector.

This report is a necessarily incomplete picture of "tech" worker organizing, in part because "tech" is so broad a category—and indeed because the workers organizing within it insist upon that broadness as a measure of solidarity. "I'm interested in definitions of 'tech worker' that map to the solidarities necessary to build the power to actually contest these companies and their transnational formations," says researcher and former Google worker Meredith Whittaker.

Emma Kinema, a former tech worker and now labor organizer, says that it is necessary to understand the political economy of these companies in order to think about organizing them. "When we organize, whether it's workers at a game studio, or a bunch of [quality assurance] tester vendors to software engineers, we talk about all of that and we see how a different piece fits into that bigger puzzle." Tech work is infrastructure work, she notes, and tech workers have to understand their role in that infrastructure to understand where and how their organizing builds power. Longtime labor organizer Stephen Lerner notes that it is organizing that challenges the view of these companies as our omnipotent yet benevolent overlords.

To Michelle Miller of organizing platform Coworker.org—where thousands of tech workers, among others, have created campaigns to challenge their bosses—tech organizing is at its best when workers who have more power (and resources) can support others across perceived divisions. This process is exemplified by the new Solidarity Fund that Coworker is piloting, raising money for organizing campaigns from the well-off workers in the industry to distribute to groups in the "tech supply chain" who are organizing. For tech workers, Miller says, Coworker is "a very appealing place because the barrier to entry is low, they understand technology, they understand communicating on the Internet. It makes sense to them."

What everyone I spoke with about organizing in “tech,” however we define it, agreed upon is that it is an absolutely necessary location for labor and the left to focus in the coming years, as these companies consolidate ever more power in a few hands. Tech is not natural, inevitable, or unchangeable; the question of who will control its direction remains up in the air.

The task ahead is daunting—in many ways, it makes the most sense to compare this moment to the rise of “industry,” of mechanized manufacturing on a grand scale. In the 1930s, after decades of mostly failing to organize the auto and steel industries, suddenly the unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations broke through and made massive gains. The task ahead requires nothing less, and it’s only barely begun.

Google

Google is in many ways the exemplar of “tech worker” organizing. It is led by the people that most people probably think of when they see the term “tech worker.” The union at Google, the Alphabet Workers Union (AWU), has programmers at the forefront. Yet even this organizing effort aims to include workers across the breadth of the company, including non-Google subsidiaries of Alphabet, and also including temps, vendors, and contractors who do a wide variety of kinds of work.

The wave of organizing that has culminated in the AWU really began after Donald Trump’s election to the presidency in 2016. Tech workers suddenly had cause to worry that their work at places like Google could be used to do harm, as big tech was increasingly pursuing government contracts, and showed no sign of slowing with the Trump administration. Leigh Honeywell and others created the “Never Again Pledge,” as programmers vowed not to allow their bosses to use their work for the purposes of surveillance, deportation, and incarceration. From the beginning, this kind of organizing was led by people within tech who come from marginalized backgrounds: queer and transgender people, people of color, and women. Those workers were often the first to see connections between their own working conditions and the people who might be targets of the products they were building.²

Michelle Miller said it was at this time that tech workers “had to experience personal disappointment.” Where many workers are spurred to organize by hope, tech workers, she says, “had to have their heart broken a little bit in

² “Never Again Pledge,” NeverAgain.tech, neveragain.tech/about.html; Tarnoff, “Tech Worker Movement.”

order to see themselves as workers, because they had to see the differential in power and have a real experience of it in these places that run on these pretend non-hierarchies and structurelessness. They had to actually experience not mattering as much as they thought they did.”

Meredith Whittaker, a research scientist at New York University’s AI Now Institute who was at the time a Google employee, describes this period as “entreating power.” It was, she said, well-organized dissent that aimed to use the proper channels and ask the decision-makers to make better decisions. They also supported organizing by security guards and cafeteria workers at their companies. But this initial organizing wave ran up against limits, and the workers began to flex different muscles.

Google workers were able to use the company’s robust internal communications tech to organize, at first. But as they began more rigorously challenging the company’s decisions, they had to move to encrypted platforms, Whittaker says. It was James Damore’s memo—a rancid document circulated by a Google employee that denounced diversity initiatives and claimed women were biologically incapable of programming—that changed the tenor of the organizing. In that moment, Whittaker says, employees first claimed protection under labor law for speaking out. It was a moment, she says, when the battle lines became clearer: “If you were a woman or a person of color, anyone who wasn’t a Stanford grad white man, you were seeing your colleagues casually affirm these biologically essentialist monstrous theories. . . . There are schisms there and coalitions that formed around that, that continued to exist through what I would call more oppositional organizing.”³

That oppositional organizing kicked up with resistance to Project Maven, a Pentagon project using machine learning to analyze drone footage. Google had signed a contract to work on the project, and Whittaker and others within the company were horrified. It was control over the products of their labor that was at issue, Parul Koul, executive chair of the AWU, says: “At Google, and I think in tech more broadly, the cutting edge of that organizing or activism is about ethical use of our labor. Which is also an aspect of our working conditions but it’s not always framed that way.” And according to Whittaker, it was the moment when workers began to think of the struggle as one about worker power, and build a strategy around that. It was a shift to a more militant organizing style that aimed to stop the company’s work on the program—and succeeded.⁴

³ Tarnoff, “Tech Worker Movement.”

⁴ Wakabayasi, Daisuke and Scott Shane, “Google Will Not Renew Pentagon Contract That Upset Employees,” *The New York Times*, June 1, 2018 [nytimes.com/2018/06/01/technology/google-pentagon-project-maven.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/01/technology/google-pentagon-project-maven.html)

But that was only the beginning of the struggle. “There are promises they’re not going to keep without some threat of worker power or some threat of a countervailing force,” Whittaker notes. “When we were first starting with Maven there was a way in which it was clear they kind of thought we were adorable. They didn’t take us seriously.” That window has since closed; Whittaker left the company, and, she notes, Google engaged the services of anti-union law firms after the Google Walkout, a massive international labor action in 50 cities where employees walked off the job in protest over sexual harassment.⁵



Google employees walk off the job to protest the company’s handling of sexual misconduct claims, on November 1, 2018, in Mountain View, California. (Photo by Mason Trinca/Getty Images)

The walkout, says Koul, “proved that something was possible and that there were issues that masses of workers would walk out for.” It was a sign that Google workers cared about their work, their coworkers, and wanted to have a say in how their work would be used, and it inspired her work on the union.

“Now the question is not, a union in tech? The question is, what kind of a union?” Whittaker says. “We’re in a new phase, and I’m looking forward to a deepening of that narrative.”

The Alphabet Workers Union is an outgrowth of the Communications

⁵ Scheiber, Noam, and Daisuke Wakabayashi. “Google Hires Firm Known for Anti-Union Efforts.” *The New York Times*, Nov. 20, 2019, [nytimes.com/2019/11/20/technology/google-union-consultant.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/20/technology/google-union-consultant.html)

Workers of America's Campaign to Organize Digital Employees (CODE-CWA), a project for which the union staffed up with organizers and has invested significant time. But in many other ways the union is a result of the specific needs of tech workers, and a beginning of an answer to Whittaker's question. It's designed as a "solidarity union," a model that is in a way a throwback to pre-National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) organizing in the US. Members voluntarily sign up and pay dues, and the union aims to organize "wall-to-wall" in the company rather than breaking down into smaller bargaining units and win an official representation election through the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The wall-to-wall structures, Koul says, are about "recognizing that a lot of full-time employees are able to advocate for [people in] other parts of the workforce in ways that they may not necessarily be able to openly do themselves."

Chewy Shaw, now the vice-chair of the Alphabet Workers Union, got involved in organizing in Google's Mountain View office after the walkout, and was involved in conversations about building worker power, and got in touch with the union through those conversations. That work began in the spring of 2020, and continued through the union's public launch January 4, 2021. When they went public, the union had a little over 200 members; it now has around 900 according to Koul. That's still a small fraction of the company's staff, particularly when one includes, as the AWU does, subcontracted employees, but it's certainly significant, especially in one of Silicon Valley's premier companies.

Shaw says, "The way we're looking at it is the NLRB gave a pathway for support from the government for workers organizing, but that's not the only way workers have organized. There's several reasons that our structure of our company just does not make that a reasonable pathway for us to deal with the issues that we're facing." To labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein, this is a smart approach. Rather than going through "A huge legal fight over who's a worker and who isn't," where Google will marshal its immense resources in a way that the workers can never match, they're simply acting to represent workers.

Shaw and Koul are both young and relatively recent Google employees; both are people of color, and Koul was recruited specifically through a program to recruit from "non-traditional" educational backgrounds. "I distinctly remember having the experience of being in a cohort of 34 people that was majority women, majority people of color," she says, and coming into a company where "non-traditional" essentially means anyone other than a white man who went to an Ivy League school. The experience of the workers in the AWU shows the way that in tech as in many other industries,

workers come to organizing as workers through the experience of being racialized and gendered people in a workplace built around the norm of white middle-class masculinity. Their difference from their mostly white male bosses is something that it's harder for them to forget, and they are often the ones who draw attention to the company's public statements that, for instance, "Black Lives Matter," and the reality of selling tech to the same police departments killing Black people. As Google employees noted in a letter to their bosses, "the same Clarkstown police force being advertised by Google as a success story has been sued multiple times for illegal surveillance of Black Lives Matter organizers."⁶

"I'm not surprised that this is how things turned out," Koul says. "If you look at our current interim [Alphabet Workers Union] executive council, for example, it is majority women and people of color, which I think reflects the fact that people from those backgrounds are often the ones that are doing so much of the work internally, like advocating for change and having an issue with the status quo."

As the union grows, it focuses on training members to be better organizers, including buying everyone a copy of *Secrets of a Successful Organizer* and focusing on internal education and consolidation. AWU is Koul's first experience labor organizing. And it's been a learning experience expanded by the pandemic, where the union members have connected with workers across the company who had questions and problems with their working conditions.

They won a concrete victory for one of those workers, Shannon Wait, a subcontracted employee at a data center in South Carolina. Wait's work could not be done from home; she was physically maintaining the infrastructure of the data center. She asked about hazard pay, and was told that she was not allowed to discuss her pay with other people, specifically with direct-hire Google employees, and was suspended from her job. She'd also asked for a water bottle—the data centers understandably get very hot with all the machines—and been refused. The union filed an unfair labor practice (ULP) charge with the NLRB and got Wait reinstated. The board also ruled that Google and its subcontractor must post notices in the center that workers have the right to organize and that neither Google nor the contractor would interfere in that organizing.

The ULP charge and its quick success underscores that while the Alphabet

⁶ Dickey, Megan Rose. "Google employees demand company stop selling tech to police." TechCrunch, June 22, 2020. techcrunch.com/2020/06/22/google-employees-demand-company-stop-selling-tech-to-police/

Union is not a typical union in its wall-to-wall structure and rejection of the NLRB process, it is still backed by a big union with resources and know-how to pull the existing levers of power, such as they are. There have been tensions within the union, though—some who'd been involved in earlier iterations of organizing felt alienated by CWA's tactics, and at one point a press release went out, announcing the AWU's membership in an international coalition and attributing a quote to Koul that she had not approved. Tensions in these workplaces, Whittaker notes, are not likely to disappear, but they bring up real questions that have to be answered about workplace democracy and democratic organizing.⁷

Thus far, Koul says, Google has publicly done very little in response to the union. "That's not to say I don't expect a heavy-handed response sometime in the future," she says. "We can see the piles and piles of money that Amazon is pouring into their anti-union campaign in Alabama. And there's no reason to suspect that other tech companies aren't going to do something similar, although it will look very different." Whittaker notes, "My concern right now is there's a lot of enthusiasm, but going up against Google, which is going up against a lot of other powerful actors, is not a joke. That is a real fight. And history tells us they will really, really fight us."

Games

It was far from the only such story, but Rockstar Games cofounder Dan Houser bragging that his employees "were working 100-hour weeks" before the launch of *Red Dead Redemption 2* became a rallying point for video game developers who were tired of what's known in the industry as "crunch": excessive overtime ahead of a game launch.⁸

Tired of long hours, lots of turnover, and a toxic culture, game workers began talking union. At the 2018 Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, a panel was scheduled titled "Union Now? Pros, Cons, and Consequences of Unionization for Game Devs." Kevin Agwaze, a UK-based game programmer, explained that workers packed the room, and from that conference, the international Game Workers Unite (GWU) campaign began. Workers created local GWU groups, and began organizing in earnest—in the UK, GWU became a branch of the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) union.

In the US, the game workers have yet to unionize a workplace, but they

⁷ Schiffer, Zoe. "Google Union in Turmoil Following Global Alliance Announcement." *The Verge*, Jan. 30, 2021, www.theverge.com/2021/1/30/22256577/alphabet-workers-union-turmoil-global-alliance-announcement-google-cwa?scrolla=5eb6d68b7fedc32c19ef33b4.

⁸ D'Anastasio, Cecilia. "A Big Union Wants to Make Videogame Workers' Lives More Sane." *Wired*, Jan. 27, 2020 www.wired.com/story/big-union-make-videogame-workers-lives-sane/.

continue to make their presence felt. The CWA made games a focus for its CODE campaign when it launched, and hired Emma Kinema, a cofounder of GWU, as a staff organizer on that campaign. Surveys found a majority of workers in the industry supporting unionization. “I think games is really interesting because it’s got the worst aspects of the tech industry and the media industry,” Kinema says. “We are cultural workers, we are artists, we produce media artifacts.” Yet, she notes, they also work in highly technical systems, and the intersection of those two worlds creates “quite a range of people with poor conditions, with passion for the work, but they see their companies being monopolized and destroyed.”⁹

In Southern California, the original GWU group became Game Workers of Southern California, a separate group from GWU and from CWA but friendly with and supportive of both. “Our personal thing is basically training folks to organize their own shop,” explains a worker from GWSC, who asked not to be identified. He is a programmer who’s been in the industry for about three years, but notes that because of the rampant turnover—layoffs and people quitting for a less punishing field—that often leaves him in “senior” positions. And the jobs have not lived up to the hype: “I moved across the country. I had my dream job. This is great. And then, ‘Hey, you’re working 80 hour weeks but we’re just going to call you on Sunday. Even though we said you had the day off, we need you to come in today.’”

“I knew that alone, I basically had no power,” he says. “They could just toss me out and hire some other new college grad with a game dev degree and a willingness to work 80 to 100 hour weeks. Especially in your first couple of years in the industry, people are so interchangeable and there’s so many people who want this job and will do anything for it that alone I couldn’t just say I’m not going to do this.”

That drove him toward organizing, both within his shop and in the industry broadly. “The biggest barrier that I’ve found to organizing is weirdly not hostile bosses or some attempts at union busting, but really just a general kind of apathy or disinterest in the subject. So a lot of the work of organizing folks is like setting up the one-on-ones that we do.” Before the pandemic, he notes, they’d go for a drink or a coffee with a coworker and talk, but the pandemic has of course made that more difficult. They’ve used a Discord server, though, for workers to virtually hang out and even play games together. Discord was part of game worker organizing from the beginning, a place for workers around the world to connect.

⁹ Favis, Elise and Gene Park. “A Majority of Game Developers Want to Unionize. Few Are Convinced It Will Happen.” *The Washington Post*, Jan. 24, 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2020/01/24/majority-game-developers-want-unionize-few-are-convinced-it-will-happen/

The big goals—an end to crunch, diversity, proper healthcare benefits—are a ways away, he says, but the value of just having these conversations has been real. And there have been smaller wins, like a calendar of projects so workers could better schedule their time. “Those concrete goals at a lower level can be really helpful,” says the GWSC worker. They can also catch frustrated coworkers before they reach the point of walking out the door. The margin between “I have to put up with this” and “I quit!” can be razor thin, he notes, but it’s in that margin that a union drive takes root.

It’s also helpful, he says, to have something to point to when he brings up unionizing with coworkers who may not have any experience of unions. “If I just walked up to a coworker and said, ‘What do you think about the idea of games unionizing?’ That’s a very different conversation than ‘What if all of us got together and told the boss, we think it’d be better if we did this this way.’”

Games workers hope that by organizing, they can change the culture of games—the GWSC worker pointed to harassment as a problem, both internal to companies and online by consumers of games, driving women, queer and transgender people out of the industry. The fact that games are so white-male-dominated becomes, he notes, is a vicious cycle—the culture of the workplace is shaped by young men and then serves to drive out anyone else. And then there’s the online culture, which management tends to treat as something unchangeable. “It is unacceptable to have all of your developers be public-facing on Twitter accounts talking about stuff and they get harassed and you just shrug your shoulders,” he says. “There was a high-profile situation involving a writer on the game *Guild Wars 2*, who was basically fired for tweets where a fan was being disrespectful to her. It’s not that they won’t protect us, it’s that they will actively sabotage our careers if it’s beneficial.”¹⁰

GWSC hosts organizer trainings—they’ve trained upwards of 100 people, the worker says, and now CODE-CWA is doing them as well. They’ve also gotten support from film industry unions, both because they’re in geographic proximity, but also because games and film overlap to a degree—some visual effects work is similar, and voice actors cross the boundaries. The first strike in games was in fact held by voice actors, and more recently writers on the game *Lovestruck* went on strike.¹¹

¹⁰ Grayson, Nathan. “Guild Wars 2 Writers Fired For Calling Out Fan On Twitter.” *Kotaku*, July 9, 2018, kotaku.com/guild-wars-2-writers-fired-for-calling-out-fan-on-twitt-1827401422

¹¹ Orland, Kyle. “Nearly a Year Later, Video Game Voice Actors End Their Strike.” *Ars Technica*, Nov. 8, 2017, arstechnica.com/gaming/2017/11/video-game-voice-actors-officially-end-strike-after-340-days/.
McAloon, Alissa. “The Writing Team for Voltage’s *Lovestruck* Is on Strike over Pay, Working Conditions.” *Gamasutra*, July 17, 2020 www.gamasutra.com/view/news/366610/The_writing_team_for_Voltages_

“In all organizing in all industries, the first couple places are the most difficult,” Kinema adds. “It’s so hard to get a single seed to just take root and be successful. But once you do, some of those people go on to go to other companies and they talk to their friends and peers and fellow game workers. And over time, the notion spreads and people understand it’s a normal thing. It’s normal to have rights at work.” CODE is organizing actively at multiple games companies, she says. “My hope is sometime soon we can see a shop that successfully wins their union and wins collective bargaining.”

Tesla

Briefly, during the pandemic, Tesla’s Elon Musk became the richest man alive.¹²

Shortly thereafter, the electric car impresario was told by the NLRB that his tweets about worker organizing had broken the law. While the NLRB has no ability to fine or otherwise punish Musk, he’s nevertheless appealed the decision, but the case brought attention back to the union drive at his Fremont, California plant, where the makers of Tesla’s famed electric vehicles are trying to become members of the United Auto Workers.

The drive is also a reminder that the “tech” sector is reliant on plenty of actual manufacturing workers, though many of them are outside of the US and thus too often out of mind. But Tesla’s plant in Fremont was acquired from General Motors, which had made cars there for decades, and despite its new machinery, the working conditions, workers say, are stuck in the past.

Jose Moran, one of the first workers to speak up publicly for the union, wrote in 2017, “I often feel like I am working for a company of the future under working conditions of the past.” He detailed long hours, excessive mandatory overtime, preventable injuries and a constant speed-up. “There is too much twisting and turning and extra physical movement to do jobs that could be simplified if workers’ input were welcomed.”¹³

A Tesla worker I spoke with, who asked not to be identified by name, has worked at the Fremont plant for seven years. “It took me two years before

[Lovestruck_is_on_strike_over_pay_working_conditions.php](#).

12 Palmer, Annie. “Jeff Bezos Overtakes Elon Musk to Reclaim Spot as World’s Richest Person.” *CNBC*, Feb. 16, 2021, www.cnbc.com/2021/02/16/jeff-bezos-reclaims-spot-as-worlds-richest-person-from-elon-musk.html.

13 Moran, Jose. “Time for Tesla to Listen.” *Medium*, Feb. 9, 2017, medium.com/@moran2017j/time-for-tesla-to-listen-ab5c6259fc88.

I finally woke up and said where the hell is the union.” he says. When he did speak up, coworkers told him not to, warning that he would be fired for talking about a union. He, too, speaks of the lack of attention to injuries, saying “this kind of job turn and burns the workers out.” Repetitive stress injuries are common, he says, and managers often tell workers to “muscle through” if they complain of pain. “The almighty production is king, we’re all expendable.”



Workers assemble cars on the line at Tesla’s factory in Fremont, CA. Photo by David Butow/Corbis via Getty Images)

He spoke too of favoritism, of promotions being given out based on schmoozing rather than skills and dedication. That favoritism, pitting workers against one another, he notes, is a way to keep workers from organizing. There have been plenty of firings in the plant that keep workers afraid, firings Tesla claims were performance-related, but the workers suspect had to do with union support. The worker notes that he keeps copies of his performance reviews so that if he gets fired, he has evidence that his work was up to snuff.¹⁴

Before Musk bought the plant, the worker notes, GM workers were unionized and made a higher wage than the Tesla workers do now, where

¹⁴ Dayen, David. “Mass Firings at Tesla Raise Labor Questions.” Capital & Main, Nov. 8, 2017, [capita-landmain.com/mass-firings-at-tesla-raise-questions-1018](http://capitalandmain.com/mass-firings-at-tesla-raise-questions-1018).

Elias, Jennifer. “Tesla workers say mass firing was not performance-related,” Silicon Valley Business Journal, Oct. 17, 2017 www.bizjournals.com/sanjose/news/2017/10/17/tesla-mass-firing-tesla.html

they say wages range from \$17 to \$21 an hour. Musk, the worker says, touts his profit-sharing plan, but the worker says that most of the employees wind up cashing out their stock options to make up for low pay and the high cost of living in the area. Also, he notes, that's all he has for a retirement plan: no 401k and no pension. The stocks, too, are distributed based on a ratings system, he says. "As long as you are satisfactory in all your categories—one category below, you don't get shares at all." The categories also include arbitrary metrics like "Team Player," and, yes, "innovation."¹⁵

Innovation was happening at the Fremont plant before Tesla; it was the home of New United Motor Manufacturing Inc. or NUMMI, a collaboration between GM and Toyota designed to bring Japanese management styles to American car companies. Before that, labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein says, it was a GM plant—he recalled joining workers on strike there while he was in graduate school at Berkeley. NUMMI was still a union plant, indeed, hyping its collaboration between workers and management, but when GM pulled out after bankruptcy due to the 2008 economic crisis, Toyota decided to let the factory close, and Musk was able to buy it. "From what I've gathered, Elon Musk started Tesla kind of like an app startup, and didn't realize that it isn't just nerds at a computer desk typing," a Tesla worker told the Guardian. "You really start losing the startup feel when you have thousands of people doing physical labor."¹⁶

So the workers called the UAW, and took their campaign public. At first, Tesla responded with carrots: fixing things, offering a pay increase. But Musk seemed to take the campaign personally, and spoke out against the union on calls and by email. He offered "a Tesla electric pod roller coaster" and free frozen yogurt, which made the worker I spoke with snort.

And then there were, of course, the tweets. In May of 2018, Musk tweeted several anti-union messages, including "Nothing stopping Tesla team at our car plant from voting union. Could do so tmrw if they wanted. But why pay union dues & give up stock options for nothing? Our safety record is 2X better than when plant was UAW & everybody already gets healthcare." The board ruled that this was an illegal threat to take the workers' profit sharing away and ordered him to read, "Federal law gives you the right to form, join, or assist a union, choose representatives to bargain with us on your behalf,

¹⁵ Dayen, David. "Charge Time: Electric Car Workers Accuse Tesla of Low Pay and Intimidation." *The American Prospect*, Apr. 10, 2017, prospect.org/economy/charge-time-electric-car-workers-accuse-tesla-low-pay-intimidation/.

¹⁶ Gonzales, Richard. "NUMMI Plant Closure Ends Toyota-GM Venture." NPR, Apr. 1, 2010, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125430405;

Wong, Julia Carrie. "Tesla Factory Workers Reveal Pain, Injury and Stress: 'Everything Feels like the Future but Us'." *The Guardian*, May 18, 2017, www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/18/tesla-workers-factory-conditions-elon-musk.

act together with other employees for your benefit and protection, choose not to engage in any of these protected activities.” He was also ordered to re-hire, with back pay, an employee who had been fired, the board ruled, illegally. It’s this decision which Musk is appealing—and, the worker noted, appealing to the appellate court in Louisiana rather than in California, presumably before more anti-union judges.¹⁷

The firings stalled the union campaign, known as “Fair Future at Tesla,” for a while, but the worker says it continues. “The union can’t do it for us, we’ve got to do it ourselves,” he says. “The strongest unions are the ones where the workers are adamant about things and very united.” Besides wages, he says, it would be meaningful to have work rules in a contract where they can’t be changed arbitrarily, and to have more input on the production process and safety.

He still wears his union shirt to work, he says. “We’re trying all different avenues, which is what you have to do nowadays. “I don’t want to leave this company; I want to make it better. People say ‘why don’t you just leave if you think it’s so bad in here? And I’m like, no, I’m not gonna turn around and turn my back on you and walk out of here. You’re going to have to burn me out because what I see is not right.”

Amazon

Amazon is labor’s new white whale. It’s easy to understand why: Jeff Bezos is the world’s richest man, the company is the world’s fourth most valuable, and represents 50% of all e-commerce in the US. During the past year, especially, workers across Amazon have become restive, noisy, rebellious.¹⁸

The failure of the campaign to unionize Amazon’s facility in Bessemer, Alabama should not, therefore, be seen as the end of anything, but rather one of a multitude of attempts that will likely continue as long as the company remains at the center of global retail and—importantly but often forgotten—of global Internet infrastructure.

“It’s really important for worker activists to understand the interplay inside Amazon as a system and the way Amazon is a system connected

17 Campbell, Alexia Fernández. “Elon Musk Broke US Labor Laws on Twitter.” Vox, Sept. 30, 2019, www.vox.com/identities/2019/9/30/20891314/elon-musk-tesla-labor-violation-nlr.

Kolodny, Lora. “Tesla Ordered to Have Elon Musk Delete Anti-Union Tweet.” CNBC, Mar. 25, 2021, www.cnbc.com/2021/03/25/tesla-elon-musk-anti-union-tweet-must-be-deleted-nlr.html.

18 Sammon, Alexander. “In Bezosworld.” *The American Prospect*, Mar. 16, 2021, prospect.org/culture/books/in-bezosworld-amazon-fulfillment-winning-and-losing/.

to all the other systems that govern our society and our economy,” says Dania Rajendra, director of Athena, a coalition of more than 50 nonprofit organizations organizing to limit Amazon’s power. “It is important that Amazon Web Services is the profit engine of the corporation. It is important that we see the way Amazon is using the workplaces of their logistics operations, in part, as laboratories for developing products and services for the rest of the employer market.”

Athena members organize workers at Amazon and also community members who have a stake in challenging the company’s rise to dominance, its crushing of independent retail, its tax dodging and massive public subsidies, its surveillance technology and connection to policing and immigration enforcement, and its environmental impact. And Rajendra sees this as a moment of opportunity to connect those threads politically. At the height of the Bessemer campaign, a poll commissioned by the AFL-CIO found that 77% of Americans supported the workers’ union drive.¹⁹

Amazon is a notoriously brutal place to work, even on the white-collar corporate side. User experience designers Emily Cunningham and Maren Costa were both fired after organizing tech employees to speak out about Amazon policies, including working conditions in the fulfillment centers. In those centers, the company is at the cutting edge not of automating labor processes as much as using machines at all times to press human workers to work harder and faster. Mohamed Mire, an Amazon worker in Minnesota, compares working in the warehouse to trying to stop an 18-wheeler from accelerating by standing in front of it and pushing. The technology that he uses to scan items also tracks how fast he goes, so every time he has to break to go to the bathroom, say, his productivity score nosedives and he has to struggle to get back on track or risk a write-up. Mire organizes with the Awood Center, a worker center based in the East African immigrant community in the Twin Cities, which was the first organization to get Amazon to bargain—though the company refuses to call it bargaining—with workers over accommodations for prayer time and Ramadan observance. Mire and his coworkers, despite not being in a union, have held walkouts and protests to pressure the company to change its treatment of workers. Otherwise, he says, “people sacrifice themselves because of that system.”²⁰

19 “NEW POLL: 77% of Americans Support Amazon Union Drive: AFL-CIO.” AFL-CIO, Apr. 5, 2021, aflcio.org/press/releases/new-poll-77-americans-support-amazon-union-drive.

20 Weise, Karen. “Amazon Illegally Fired Activist Workers, Labor Board Finds.” *The New York Times*, Apr. 5, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/04/05/technology/amazon-nlrb-activist-workers.html.

Harris, Malcolm. “The Singular Pursuit of Comrade Bezos.” *Medium*, Feb. 15, 2018, medium.com/s/story/the-singular-pursuit-of-comrade-bezos-3e280baa045c.

Kantor, Jodi, and David Streitfeld. “Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace.” *The*

Tyler Hamilton, another Minnesota Amazon worker, reached out to the Awood center in 2019 along with some coworkers after the company imposed a slate of changes on the workforce, including a speed-up of rates. After talking with Awood, Hamilton's facility had a walkout, and succeeded in pushing back some of the changes. "Since we first had our walkout we've just continuously been organizing in different ways," he says. They've challenged rates, the hiring of new workers through staffing agencies or as temps, used state-mandated safety committees as a place to organize, and made demands about COVID-19-safe protections. "We had several walkouts and strikes, petitions and all sorts of things right at the beginning of the pandemic," Hamilton adds, "to hold their feet to the fire to force them to make those changes and to make them as fast as possible."

Beth Gutelius, research director of the Center for Urban Economic Development at the University of Illinois Chicago, calls Amazon's company style "regressive innovation," saying "it's a throwback to early 20th century methods of workforce management. But, with the addition of algorithms, the monitoring and surveillance at scale which in the end, at least in its e-commerce business, Amazon's real competitive advantage is its ability to surveil and monitor and nudge its workforce at scale."

Because, as Hamilton notes, the warehouses need to be near Amazon's customers in order to make its Prime delivery speeds feasible. That means squeezing the most work possible out of its workforce, even as it concedes to paying \$15 an hour, and collecting data off them all the while, in a form of "cyborg Taylorism." (The company has hired the actual Pinkerton agency, with over a century of union-busting history, to "gather intelligence" on workers organizing.) It's Amazon's control over workers like Mire and Hamilton that matters to the company, and it is that control that worker organizing threatens. Rajendra adds, "the role of Amazon is about exerting discipline, exerting control, dominating for the sake of dollars but not only for the sake of dollars. Amazon's growth in the rest of the world is also the exporting of the particularly regressive American labor relations model."²¹

And part of that model is dividing workers along race and gender lines. "It's not a coincidence that workers who are organizing to stand up to Bezos, whether in Minnesota or in Alabama, are predominantly Black," Rajendra says, pointing to workers like Chris Smalls, Jonathan Bailey, and Gerald

New York Times, Aug. 15, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/technology/inside-amazon-wrestling-big-ideas-in-a-bruising-workplace.html.

²¹Gurley, Lauren Kaori. "Secret Amazon Reports Expose Company Spying on Labor, Environmental Groups," *Vice*, November 23, 2020 www.vice.com/en/article/5dp3yn/amazon-leaked-reports-expose-spying-warehouse-workers-labor-union-environmental-groups-social-movements.

Bryson, all of whom are Black and faced retaliation from the company that they said was racialized. “In the same way, there’s nothing accidental about the way in which Black and Latinx communities have absorbed the job losses of the last year and, in particular, women have absorbed them.” As Amazon takes up the space that Walmart used to fill, she notes, “we have traded feminized customer service retail labor for the servitude and the efficiency of the button and the anonymization of it.” The warehouse, rather than the retail store, is now the focal point, and the warehouse, though it employs plenty of women—like Jennifer Bates, one of the leaders of the Bessemer campaign—is more obviously brutal in its working conditions, in part, notes labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein, to ensure the swiftest possible movement of goods. Amazon, he points out, took Walmart’s distribution center model and perfected it.²²

The Bessemer facility opened last March, in the middle of the early panicky stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, and so the fact that workers were able to pull off a union drive at all is stunning. On top of the usual isolation of work in the massive fulfillment centers, there’s the way the company used social distancing rules, workers from around the country say, as a reason to punish workers for talking to each other. The Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union filed its petition for an NLRB election last November, and since the loss, some—like Jane McAlevey—have criticized its prioritizing of speed rather than structure-testing the workforce to be sure they were ready for the brutal anti-union tactics the company would employ. McAlevey also writes that the union’s decision not to do house calls to workers because of the pandemic limited its ability to engage deeply with workers who were facing constant captive audience meetings and endless calls and texts from the boss urging them to vote no. The company installed a mailbox on its property and encouraged workers to vote there, and the union even complained that the company was offering workers bonuses if they quit.²³

22 Solon, Olivia, and April Glaser. “Fired, Interrogated, Disciplined: Amazon Warehouse Organizers Allege Year of Retaliation.” NBCNews.com, March 30, 2021, www.nbcnews.com/news/amp/nca1262367.

Wong, Julia Carrie, “Amazon execs labeled fired worker ‘not smart or articulate’ in leaked PR notes,” *The Guardian*, April 2, 2020 www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/apr/02/amazon-chris-smalls-smart-articulate-leaked-memo

23 Leon, Luis Feliz. “The Amazon Union Vote Is Ending in Bessemer. Workers Are Already Preparing for the Next Fight.” *The New Republic*, Mar. 26, 2021, newrepublic.com/article/161821/amazon-union-vote-results-bessemer-alabama.

McAlevey, Jane. “Blowout in Bessemer: A Postmortem on the Amazon Campaign.” *The Nation*, 14 Apr. 2021, www.thenation.com/article/activism/bessemer-alabama-amazon-union/.

Thornton, William. “Amazon, Union Organizers at Odds over ‘Pay to Quit’ Bonuses.” *AI.com*, Feb. 22, 2021, www.ai.com/business/2021/02/amazon-union-organizers-at-odds-over-pay-to-quit-bonuses.html.

Thornton, William. “Mailbox Stirs Controversy in Amazon Union Vote.” *AI.com*, Feb. 24, 2021, www.ai.com/business/2021/02/mailbox-stirs-controversy-in-amazon-union-vote.html.

Even if it turns out that Amazon broke the law in Bessemer—the union filed 23 charges of various improper behavior, including illegally threatening layoffs and wage and benefit cuts if the workers voted for the union—the NLRB as currently constituted has little power to punish it. Five years ago, Amazon had to post a notice to the employees of one of its Virginia facilities, listing 22 violations the company promised, like a naughty schoolchild, not to repeat. “We will not interrogate you” or “engage in surveillance of you.” Readers can guess how successful that pledge was at helping workers to organize. “In their business model they try to build everything in that they can to make it resistant to organizing or unionizing in any way,” Hamilton says. “Normally if you try to organize, and then in response they put cameras everywhere, then you can file a labor complaint saying, ‘In response to the unionization they stepped up surveillance.’ Amazon doesn’t want that to happen, so they do all of that stuff from day one.”²⁴

But in the wake of Bessemer we can also see the beginnings of the shape of what it will take to crack Amazon. The support that the workers there got from Democratic Socialists of America and local Black Lives Matter organizers, who made phone calls and canvassed and hung signs across town, reminds us of the work of auxiliary groups to support the Flint Sit-Down Strike during the drive to unionize the auto industry in the thirties. The same week as votes were counted in Bessemer, Amazon workers in Chicago went on strike against the “Megacycle,” a newly-instituted 10-hour-plus overnight shift. The “Amazonians United Chicagoland” are just one of several groups of self-organized Amazon workers, with some outside support, who struck and walked out throughout the pandemic—and faced retaliation from the company. So many complaints were filed against the company in the last year that the NLRB was considering a rare consolidation across regions. This is an indicator of Amazon’s anti-union tactics, but also of the level of worker activity, from Queens to Bessemer to Los Angeles, where workers with the Congress of Essential Workers, founded by fired Amazon warehouse worker Chris Smalls, marched to Bezos’s Beverly Hills mansion with their demands. Even Mechanical Turkers, the micro-task workers on Amazon’s platform, who do everything from tagging images to content moderation, are trying to organize to demand better rates and control over their tasks.²⁵

24 Streitfeld, David. “How Amazon Crushes Unions.” *The New York Times*, Mar. 16, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/03/16/technology/amazon-unions-virginia.html.

Jamieson, Dave. “Union Claims Amazon Tainted Election, Wants Vote Overturned.” *HuffPost*, Apr. 19, 2021, www.huffpost.com/entry/union-claims-amazon-tainted-election-seeks-to-have-vote-overturned_n_607da039e4b0eac48140f003

25 “Amazon Workers March to Jeff Bezos’ Mansion, Calling for Higher Wages, Protections.” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 5, 2020, www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-10-04/amazon-jeff-bezos-protest-bever-

It is necessary for workers to win at Amazon, but, Rajendra notes, the challenge is not simply to improve jobs but leave the power of one private company—or, indeed, any of these massive tech companies—intact. “Big tech has a hold on our imagination of any kind of future and if the best we can imagine for our future is that working at Amazon is less punishing, Facebook puts fewer Black activists in Facebook jail...shame on us and our imagination.”

Sarah Jaffe is the author of Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted and Alone and of Necessary Trouble: Americans in Revolt, both from Bold Type Books.

ly-hills.

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Wakefield, Jane. “AI: Ghost Workers Demand to Be Seen and Heard.” *BBC News*, Mar. 28, 2021, www.bbc.com/news/technology-56414491;

Solon and Glaser. “Fired, Interrogated, Disciplined: Amazon Warehouse Organizers Allege Year of Retaliation”; Gurley, Lauren Kaori. “Amazon Workers in Chicago Strike Over Ruthless ‘Megacycle’ Shifts.” *VICE*, April 7, 2021 www.vice.com/en/article/g5gxp/amazon-workers-in-chicago-strike-over-ruthless-megacycle-shifts.

