



# THERE IS POWER IN A UNION: REVOLUTIONARY TRADE UNIONISM HISTORY AND PRAXIS

## Readings for Class Four: Rebuilding the Revolutionary Labor Movement Today

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- P2 **Victory for striking students at Columbia University**  
By BONNIE CHRISTILAW
- P3 **Amazon Workers on Staten Island Clinch a Historic Victory**  
By LUIS FELIZ LEON
- P5 **25 days on strike at Starbucks:  
Interview with worker and organizer Spencer Costigan**  
By JACOB BUCKNER
- P8 **Sunset of the AFL-CIO?**  
By CHRIS TOWNSEND
- P11 **Presentation by Chris Smalls to NY Conference  
Against US Blockade of Cuba**  
By CHRISTIAN SMALLS
- P12 **Strains Emerge Inside the Union That Beat Amazon**  
By NOAM SCHEIBER

# Victory for striking students at Columbia University

By BONNIE CHRISTILAW, Jan 21 2022

NEW YORK — On the morning of Jan. 7, Student Workers of Columbia announced that they had reached a tentative agreement with Columbia University, and overwhelmingly voted in favor of ending their strike.

Student Workers of Columbia, or “SWC” (UAW Local 2110) was first recognized by the National Labor Relations Board in 2017 and has over 3,000 members. They had been on strike continuously since Nov. 3, 2021, demanding, among other things, union recognition for all student workers, better health coverage, better protection from harassment, and higher wages.

Wage increases were especially crucial, as Columbia, like many employers, pays far below the cost of living in New York City. And in an ongoing pandemic, particularly in a country which has failed to protect and provide for its people, the need for secure employment and adequate compensation has only become more urgent.

These shortfalls are concerning due to Columbia’s exclusive status and its considerable endowment, one of the largest in the country at over \$14 billion. If workers at all levels, from clerical assistants to Ph.D. students, are shortchanged this badly by wealthy, prestigious institutions, what are the conditions like at other universities?

This strike is another in the long line of recent labor actions across the country: This time last year, Teamsters Local 202 were on the picket line in the Bronx. For five weeks this fall, over 10,000 John Deere workers struck for better pay. Just this month, over 8,000 grocery store workers in Colorado went on strike, and have already faced harsh retaliation from Kroger stores. With working conditions continually becoming direr in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, we can only expect more workers to take charge and demand better treatment.

During a previous meeting with Columbia on New Year’s Eve, SWC offered a new written proposal which modified their previous union dues article in order to abide by the NLRB’s 2017 certification, giving all casual employees the explicit choice of whether or not they want to join the union. Some concessions made by the union included below-inflation raise caps and forfeiting the right to strike for four years. The University responded by pushing for an open-shop bargaining model, meaning that students could exclude themselves from the union while still benefiting from collective bargaining done on their behalf.

The University’s other demand was to re-work the contract recognition language, deviating from the article of recognition as established by the NLRB in 2017 (which the

university already agreed to in 2018). According to SWC, if allowed to essentially re-write these rules, the doors would open for Columbia to alter workers’ employment statuses and restructure hiring in order to minimize union eligibility. SWC was rightfully concerned that these measures would erode their bargaining power before the next contract negotiation, and rejected the university’s supposals. Columbia University retaliated by threatening to cancel courses led by striking workers, including core curriculum classes, and attempting to hire scabs.

On the night of Jan. 6, after 10 weeks of striking, the university and SWC finally reached a tentative agreement, which enshrines major improvements for student workers at Columbia and affiliated institutions. Highlights of the new contract include compensation increases (including retroactive increases), access to arbitration and mediation for harassment and discrimination claims, and full recognition in accordance with the NLRB’s exact language. This contract will have a duration of four years, with the next negotiation period beginning in the Spring of 2025. The announcement of an agreement was met with congratulations from other unions on social media, including the New York State Nurses Association, the New York AFL-CIO, and Rutgers AAUP-AFT, the graduate workers union of Rutgers University.

SWC is currently in the midst of its discussion period, during which there will be a number of town halls held for faculty and students alike to learn about the new contract, with a voting period to follow. A decision on whether to ratify the new contract will likely be announced January 28. Until then, the union has asked for donations to their hardship fund, in order to offset wages lost during the strike.



# Amazon Workers on Staten Island Clinch a Historic Victory

By LUIS FELIZ LEON, Labor Notes, April 1 2022

It's the magical stuff of Disney movies. But yesterday, the improbable became the most probable when the scrappy band of workers who make up the Amazon Labor Union took the lead in a union election at a warehouse in Staten Island, New York, putting within reach a historic labor win at the corporate behemoth.

Before the vote count most reporters had dismissed the independent union's chances, treating the organizing as a curiosity at best. "I think we have been overlooked," said ALU Treasurer Madeline Wesley Thursday night. "And I think that that ends tomorrow when we are victorious."

The ALU clinched a decisive victory today, winning by a wide margin to create the first unionized workplace in Amazon's extensive network of fulfillment, delivery, and sortation centers across the U.S. The company's facilities are concentrated in metropolitan areas like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, opening a path for more organizing.

The vote at the Staten Island warehouse was 2,654 in favor of forming a union to 2,131 against. There were 67 challenged ballots, and 17 voided; 8,325 workers were eligible to vote.

"We want to thank Jeff Bezos for going to space, because while he was up there we were organizing a union," said ALU President Chris Smalls after official results were announced.

Another warehouse at the same complex on Staten Island, LDJ5, will begin a vote to unionize with the ALU on April 25.

## MAPPED OUT THE LEADERS

Thursday night in Brooklyn, after the first six of the 10



boxes of ballots had been counted, workers were giddy with excitement and disbelief, dancing to hip-hop and laughing.

"It seemed like a long shot," said ALU Vice President Derrick Palmer outside the building in Bushwick, weighting each word for emphasis. "But we just went out there and did it—workers, unionizing the second-largest private employer in the country."

The more Palmer spoke about what exactly they had done to accomplish the impressive feat, the clearer it became that neither magic nor luck had anything to do with the union's victory; it was hardscrabble worker-to-worker organizing that got the goods.

Palmer has worked as a packer at Amazon's sprawling warehouse complex for three years. He estimates that out of 100 people in his department, 70 percent were solid yes voters.

"I pretty much flipped my whole department," he said. "What I'll do is study a group of friends and go to the leader of the pack. Whatever the leader says, the rest of the group is going to do."

Fellow ALU organizer Michael Aguilar agreed about the approach. For example, "Cassio [Mendoza] talks to all the Latino workers in the building," he said.

"I knew that we would win because of Maddie [Wesley]," Aguilar added. "She's so empathetic, so she can connect with a lot of people in the building. She was one of the key leaders."

The independent union enlisted the support of volunteers from various unions and community groups to run a phone banking operation. Wesley tallied union support on the phones and in tabling outside the facility; it was during one such tabling that she recruited Aguilar to the organizing effort.

"Our data had about 65 percent support, which obviously has some margin of error because the people who are most likely to talk to us are most likely to be supporters," said Wesley.

Most of the workers I spoke to didn't use organizing lingo, but they had clearly mapped the warehouse. "We know in which departments, and on which shifts, we have strong support because of where our organizers are," Wesley said.

ALU member Justine Medina credited Communist organizer William Z. Foster's Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry for the group's organizational acumen and bottom-up organizing approach. She and others on the organizing committee read and discussed it, giving it out to workers to read. (See sidebar.)

## AN INSIDE JOB

The worker-led character of the organizing drive gave it credibility. When Amazon tried to portray the union as an outside “third party,” its highly paid consultants’ arguments would fall flat, because workers would take their questions to their ALU co-workers.

Meetings in the break room were decisive, Palmer said: “I was organizing in the break room on my days off like 10 hours a day, giving out food, talking to workers, and giving out information.”

Smalls said he urged co-workers, “Come have a conversation with me. Don’t just go off what you’re hearing from Amazon and the rumors.”

But collective actions were crucial too. “We showed them that we’re fearless,” said Smalls. “We did rallies in front of the building. We showed them, better than we can talk about it.”

Smalls led a walkout in March 2020 to protest the company’s failure to keep workers safe from the pandemic. Amazon fired him afterwards, supposedly for violating Covid protocols. Vice reported that the company’s general counsel insulted Smalls in a meeting with top brass, calling him “not smart or articulate.”

These remarks have elevated the charismatic Smalls as the face of the union drive. But asked about the media attention, he points to the collective struggle and emphasizes that the ALU operates on democratic principles, with all decisions voted on. “I’m just the interim president,” he said. “I’m temporary. It’s not my union; it’s the people’s union.”

## PLENTY MORE WAREHOUSES

Standing outside in a drizzle of rain Thursday night, he lifted his hand and pointed towards the Brooklyn apartment they’ve turned into their homebase: “That’s all I had was 20 core committee members, and a workers’ committee of over 100 people. We started with about four.”

Asked if ALU would consider affiliating with another union, he said, “I got to be with the people that was with me from day one. We want to stay independent, and it’s better that way. That’s how we got here.”

But, he adds, “whatever anybody is doing against Amazon, shiiiiit, they got my support! There’s plenty of [Amazon] buildings. Pick one!”

He compared ALU’s culture to Money Heist, the Spanish Netflix series where a criminal mastermind known as “The Professor” brings a band of criminals together to take on the state and steal billions of euros from the Royal Mint.

“Call me The Professor,” he jokes.

Smalls went from hip-hop hopeful to labor leader. “Life is crazy,” he said. “That’s all I can say. Who would have thought?”

### How We Did It by Justine Medina

My quick-and-dirty analysis of the Amazon Labor Union’s successes so far is pretty simple. We just did the thing you’re supposed to do: we had a worker-led movement.

We studied the history of how the first major unions were built. We learned from the Industrial Workers of the World, and even more from the building of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. We read William Z. Foster’s *Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry* (a must-read, seriously).

But here’s the basic thing: you have an actual worker-led project—a Black- and Brown-led, multi-racial, multi-national, multi-gender, multi-ability organizing team. You get some salts with some organizing experience, but make sure they’re prepared to put in the work and to follow the lead of workers who have been around the shop longer. You get the Communists involved, you get some socialists and anarcho-syndicalists, you bring together a broad progressive coalition. You bring in sympathetic comrades from other unions, in a supporting role.

Really, you just follow the classic playbook. Do not be afraid to fight, to get as dirty as the bosses will, to match or beat the energy they’re bringing. Do not be afraid to agitate and to antagonize the bosses, as a union should. Use every tool in your toolbox; file those unfair labor practice charges, every chance you get. Protest and do collective action. Keep building.

It’s the hard work, every day: workers talking to workers. Not just media games, but solidarity, daily analysis, and adjusting as needed. It’s working as a collective, learning together, and teaching each other. Get back to fighting form. That’s how we won.

What I’m describing wasn’t my plan, but the efforts of Amazon workers who got fed up with their mistreatment. I was lucky to be recruited into this effort as a salt by the organizing committee because of my organizing experience with the Young Communist League. I was welcomed with open arms, and it has changed the path of my life completely, but I’ve always understood my role to be following the lead of the workers who were there before me.

This was a truly collective effort, led by some brilliant Amazon workers thrust into organizing by the pandemic and the conditions of their lives; Chris Smalls and Derrick Palmer in particular have been tremendous leaders. I think this union shows the true possibility of what is before us, as a labor movement—if we just remember how to do it.

Justine Medina is a member of the ALU organizing committee and a packer at the JFK8 Amazon warehouse.

## 25 days on strike at Starbucks: Interview with worker and organizer Spencer Costigan

By JACOB BUCKNER

*Spencer Costigan is a worker and a union organizer at the Starbucks store at 874 Commonwealth Avenue in Boston. The workers there have been on strike for nearly a month, pushed to the picket line by the company's rollout of a divisive unequal employee benefits plan aimed at curbing support for the union and by the installation of a store manager that workers say has a history of racist, homophobic, and transphobic behavior. 874 Commonwealth is one of five Starbucks locations currently on strike in the Boston area. Workers at four other stores walked off the job on August 1st. People's World reporter Jacob Buckner talked with Costigan about the effort to unionize, the company actions that prompted the strike, and how the struggle is going now.*

### **How did the organizing effort begin at your Starbucks store? What was the response from management when you all decided to unionize?**

The process began when I heard about the store up the street, Starbucks 1304, unionizing, and I was immediately on the hunt for who to talk to about getting involved. I started looking for a contact who could get me in touch with someone from 1304 or Starbucks Workers United.

I've always been a politically involved person and have always been concerned with working class issues specifically. Growing up in a relatively poor household, it has always been at the forefront of my life and politics. I saw unionizing as an obvious win for my workplace, so I thought, let's figure out how to do this.

We decided to go through with it at the end of March. We were trying to do it so the manager wouldn't find out. It was such an overwhelming drive from the entire store, and we were stoked for it. We had a mail-in vote that was agreed upon by the NLRB and the company. We mailed the ballots in, and they were counted on June 3rd. The company tried to contest a lot of the ballots, trying to water down all of our support. We still won unanimously, 10 to 0.

My vote was contested by the company because me and the other person who helped set it up with me were shift managers, and there was a gray area as to whether or not we were allowed in the union.

### **I know that the company then held these anti-union meetings. What were some of the main points that were being conveyed at the "captive audience" meetings?**

They split us up into three groups over the span of three

weeks. Each group went to three meetings, so nine meetings in total. I made sure in every group that there was somebody to call out company disinformation.

They would say, "We don't want someone to stand between you and Starbucks, we're going to avoid getting a third party involved." I would say, "Aren't you all bringing in third parties? I do not recognize any of these people." They flew corporate people out from Texas, and they seem more third party than the people in the union.

The union consists of us, the people who work together in the store. They are trying to pull this with negotiations, saying the union is trying to get in the way, but they're the one getting lawyers while the union is people that work at Starbucks.

They would also try to say there's no telling how much your union dues would be. But there is telling, you could look at what kind of union dues similarly compensated fields pay. But people in unions, similar to the one we would be joining, typically make 15% more than non-unionized workers, and the union dues are usually \$12 a week. They said we can't guarantee that the dues wouldn't be more.

Starbucks said if you all unionize, we can't guarantee you can keep all your benefits, but we said, "You can't guarantee we can keep them right now!" The whole point of unionizing is that you get a contract, to make sure that the company could not take benefits away because they feel like it.

They said Starbucks wouldn't do that, well lo and behold, two months later they said we might have to get rid of abortion protection and trans health care. They would say unions are just a business that is trying to take your money, but the union we're talking to does not take dues until we get a contract. We can say no until we get the contract we want.

We countered everything they said. They made it sound like unions are esoteric, outdated institutions, where there's no individuality. Saying the union is going to talk



for you, the union will make you do things you do not want to do. But we're already forced to do things we don't want to do by the company, at least we will get to vote on whether we want to do it if we have a union.

**So we understand that after you started organizing, Starbucks rolled out a new benefits program—improved sick leave, credit card tipping for 240,000 employees, expanded training. It all sounded good except they cut you out—the company explicitly excluded workers involved in the union. When did you all find out that these benefits were coming?**

I believe it was in mid-May, after we had filed to have a vote. I immediately asked a couple people involved in organizing work because this rollout seemed incredibly illegal, and they confirmed that it was and that Starbucks couldn't do this.

We put a note up next to the flyer about all of the benefits we would not be getting and saying this was illegal. Management then took it down, so I wrote it on the flyer itself and made sure everybody in the store knew that it's illegal if they don't give this to us. We weren't going to stay quiet about it. It was a guerilla marketing campaign to make sure everybody in the store got loud about how illegal this was and to guarantee that management knew that we knew.

**Your strike has been going on for almost a month now. It was joined by the workers at other locations in Boston who went on strike August 1st. You all at the 874 Commonwealth Avenue store took action first because of the new manager that corporate sent into the store. Can you tell me about what you all are demanding?**

By June 6th, a new manager came in and immediately started cutting our hours across the board, telling me when I was writing the schedule that I should focus on making sure workers don't get more than 18 hours. Some of these people were getting 36 hours prior, so this meant cutting their pay in half. Your rent is not going to cut in half just because you are not working as much.

She demanded that people expand their availability despite the fact that they were getting less hours, and if they couldn't do it, she was threatening to fire people, which is incredibly illegal. She has also been racist, homophobic, and transphobic, misgendering a lot of our trans partners and making racial comments about Black partners' hair.

This is part of a pattern of behavior; she's been investigated for this sort of behavior in the past, but of course the company that she previously worked for ended up finding no wrongdoing. That is what Starbucks is trying to say now, and one of the main demands of our strike is to fire her and get rid of her.

The company loves liberal posturing, saying things like, "We love people of color and queer people, we think it's so important that they have a safe space to be who they are," but then they're bending over backwards to defend this monster manager from the kind of behavior they claim to be against. This shows that businesses are businesses and profits will always be put ahead of workers. It has been very good for me, because it has helped further radicalize all of my co-workers.

The strike has been super-inspiring; I cannot overemphasize how helpful and welcoming the community has been. It's really tough to imagine a different world, but having that reminder that people do care and see themselves and understand themselves as workers is powerful. Even if they don't understand it on a political level, they understand it on an innate level, which is very important. They will never be [Starbucks CEO] Howard Shultz, and they are much more likely to be a barista, they're much more likely to need the kind of defense we're arguing for.

Everyone has been very helpful, with a lot of people I did not expect to be as involved as they were stepping up in incredible ways. It has shown that those people who were at first weary of a strike are getting more confident and outspoken with their demands. Every time I'm out on the line, which is everyday, I'm meeting new people who are very kind and inspiring to be around. Every single day we have new people, like teachers, who say, "I heard about this from my union and needed to get out here to make sure you all are okay."

The school bus drivers' union has been really helpful, Teamsters, and I can keep on naming various unions and political organizations. I've met people from 25 different unions at this point in and around the Boston area. We have people driving from an hour or more away to hold down the line at 11:00 PM; people are really committed to helping us. The sense of solidarity has been unreal.

**The movement to organize Starbucks workers is relatively new, being only a year old. Yet with all of this action happening, in Massachusetts especially, do you feel this represents that workers are realizing the power of unions?**

I know that our strike helped inspire workers in a lot of stores to go on strike for August 1st and remain on strike until today. I've had other stores request people from my store to talk to them about our experiences on the line so they know what to expect.

It has been hugely rewarding for people to look to us for inspiration of what to do next. We're only the Boston area Starbucks, but all of the coffee shops in the area, both at the unionized coffee shops and a couple of people from non-unionized ones, have all shown up to help us, talking about how crucial what we're doing is.

What we're doing is really important in a way that we did not understand at the time we started. Initially, we were supposed to go on strike for one or two days, but once it began, everybody in our store thought, "No, we can keep this going for as long as we need" because it is crucial. We saw this easing into it with a lot of the other stores that went on strike August 1st, where they would go on a strike for August 1st and then they would see from there. August 2nd comes around and they're still on strike because they understand this is how you do it, this is what to expect.

For the past five days or so, these stores have been on strike, explicitly in solidarity with us. Saying, "This strike started in order to be included in these benefits that you're illegally withholding from us, and now we're on strike because the people at 874 Commonwealth Ave deserve to have their demands met." This solidarity being shown is setting an example.

Starbucks wants to atomize us and make us seem like we work at individual stores disconnected from one another, but we are actively choosing to ignore that and bargain as a cohesive unit. We are either all at the table or all at the line. I know that if the workers at one of these other stores have to deal with some of the same bullshit that we're dealing with, since it is inevitable, I can depend on a lot of people at my store to show up to their picket line and make sure they have the kind of support that they've shown us.

## Sunset of the AFL-CIO?

By CHRIS TOWNSEND, June 27 2022

The 29th Constitutional Convention of the American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) opened in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on June 12, 2022 delayed by one year owing to pandemic conditions. There was little fanfare, and little advance publicity apparently. Even ordinarily sympathetic observers of AFL-CIO Conventions have been struck by the low profile and energy of the proceedings. Held only every 4 years the Federation Convention is the one minimally public event where union leaders, members, activists, and supporters of the labor movement might be able to look for leadership on the dizzying array of issues facing working people.

In recent decades as the labor movement has been assaulted from all sides less and less public and media attention is seemingly paid to this otherwise critical council of the leadership of such a primary section of the organized working class. By comparison, the twice-as-large Labor Notes conference convened in Chicago just a week after the AFL-CIO Convention, and it offered a dramatically different and far more energetic approach to solving labor's crises and problems.

The AFL-CIO is comprised of 57 industrial and craft unions, claiming a combined total of 12.5 million U.S. members. When those only nominally associated with their unions are subtracted – primarily retirees and political campaign enrollees – actual Federation membership is significantly less. And in addition to this membership, more than 7 million workers belong to unions not affiliated with the AFL-CIO. The stark facts today would be that the unionized section of the U.S. working class remains numerically small, embattled, isolated, and encircled by hostile employers and governments. Activity levels among union members at the workplaces has declined as a result. The total unionized slice of the workforce has also been steadily shrinking as a proportion of the entire workforce for the past 70 years, now well less than 10%.

While positive anecdotes are always to be found in abundance where unions and workers fight back or try to advance, the overall condition of the labor movement given this imbalance of forces is precarious at best. For my entire working life as a union member – more than 40 years – the situation has been steadily deteriorating as both employers and governments systematically attack the remaining organized union garrisons in the industries. Our growth in new sections of the economy has been virtually stopped, as the employers have adopted an all-out union smashing strategy to prevent the unions from regenerating. The new industries have been nearly impossible to organize, so the unions continue to suffer major losses in established bases that they are unable to replace.

## Convention Die Cast on Day One

Given the dire situation we now face as a labor movement one might have imagined a Federation Convention dedicated to intense study and debate regarding our situation. Or, we might have imagined a vigorous pre-Convention process where the disastrous situation we confront would have been dissected in a search for solutions by the leadership. Very little of this apparently happened, however. The Philadelphia Convention opened without the presence of the well-known and outsized figure of Richard Trumka, who died suddenly in August of 2021 after more than 25 years as first the Secretary-Treasurer, then the President of the Federation. Trumka had announced his intention to retire at the Philadelphia Convention, and his sudden death opened-up the possibility of an actual election contest for the leadership spot.

Trumka's hand-picked successor was AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler, the preferred shoo-in of the conservative elements in the various affiliate unions. Progressive forces scattered in the unions had promoted a possible candidacy by airline Flight Attendants (AFA) union President Sara Nelson, but resistance from the old regime's supporters and a front-loaded leadership election on day one of the Convention ended any such thought of a challenge. Shuler was elected without debate or discussion. The small progressive forces in the various union leaderships – and the even smaller left elements – were unable to crystallize the needed support for Nelson that might have forced an election challenge and a wide-ranging debate of the many crises faced. The hurried Shuler election on day one ended any hopes for discussion, debate, or any meaningful appraisal of the state of things facing the unions at the Philadelphia meeting.

## More Decay and Drift Ahead

With no leadership challenge or debate having materialized, the Convention proceeded to move through its customary standard agenda on a predictable course. The multiple disasters facing the labor federation were at times mentioned, but little urgent action was proposed. Scripted speeches, stage-managed presentations, visiting VIP guests from the Democratic Party – notably President Joe Biden – spoke to the assemblage, and an array of video clips were shown to try to inject enthusiasm into the audience. A trade show theme permeated the Convention as job training, “wellness”, and other HR functions were offered as substitutes for traditional trade union responses.

Some ongoing struggles and organizing successes were thankfully showcased, although the leaders of the three largest successful NLRB union election campaigns in the past 3 months – Amazon, Starbucks, and MIT – were all barely noted. Ironically, the three unions responsible for those wins – the Amazon Labor Union (ALU),



Workers United (SEIU), and the United Electrical Workers Union (UE) – are not affiliates of the AFL-CIO. These unprecedented and successful uprisings of more than 15,000 unorganized workers in previously untouchable anti-union employer fortresses were little noted in the AFL-CIO proceedings.

During the week a variety of other public decisions were made; Fred Redmond from the Steelworkers Union was elected Secretary-Treasurer; the Executive Vice President slot was eliminated by being merged apparently with the Secretary-Treasurer position; a new Executive Council of affiliate union leaders was elected without any challenges or debate; and at the very end of the Convention it was announced that a new organizing initiative would be launched presumably to address the stagnant and sinking membership levels. No details or timelines were announced as to how or when this would be done. So ended the Convention of AFL-CIO, the all-too-rare meeting of the leaders and general staffs of the unions comprising the U.S. labor federation. My now departed and dear friend Harry Kelber – a tireless advocate for an improved democratic and deliberative process at AFL-CIO Conventions – would have been dumbstruck at the proceedings, what they covered, and what they did not cover.

### **Crises Will Deepen and Worsen**

A “steady as she goes” approach has been the preferred course by the labor leadership for decades. It has proven to be a reliable path to a “rule or ruin” legacy where the singular goal of maintaining complete control crowds out all other considerations. Such is sadly the state in many of the affiliate unions as well. Ignoring problems and crises, delaying real discussion of new and urgently needed solutions, praying child-like for a miracle to save the “the middle class”, hiring outside advertising firms to explore new “messaging” schemes, continued habituation to decline and decay, an unwillingness to question the political strait-jacket of the Federation, substituting non-profits and NGO’s for the development of real trade union capacity, and even overt submissive gestures to enemy political forces and corporations in the vain search for allies have all been standard responses over the decades. Given this historically failed and sterile process no other outcome other than continued decline is to be expected. The Philadelphia Convention has ended, the delegates have drawn their breath and drawn their pay, and that’s that.

### **Progressives and Militants Demobilized and Scattered**

Defenders and apologists of the status-quo alike have always pointed out one fact that is not in question here, which is to correctly observe that “The AFL-CIO is only a sum of its parts.” Meaning, that the Federation itself is merely a reflection of the character of the unions and the union leadership that comprise the leadership of the affiliate unions. Today’s situation within the labor center

reflects accurately an overall business union malaise deeply infecting the labor movement. The current untenable and dangerous situation will not correct itself, either. The highly paid leaders of the bulk of the affiliate unions – and their networks of appointees and paid staff completely beholden to them – are customarily insulated and protected from virtually all political challenges in their own unions.

The progressive and left elements in the unions do exist, but they are precariously scattered and unable or unwilling to bring forward demands for such basic initiatives as the need for internal democratization of the unions, for aggressive bargaining campaigns before the current economic conditions deteriorate, for mass campaigns of new organization, or advocacy towards a new and improved political action program. Some of the more activist and progressive forces within the affiliate unions did emerge as part of the network which pushed for a candidacy by Sara Nelson from the Flight Attendants, but in the end the network was too small, too isolated, opposed by too many, undermined, and unable to pull together a campaign to confront the old guard as personified by Shuler.

### **Need for Real Work in the Unions**

Over the past 30 years there have been 3 distinct union leadership groupings that have collected around demands that the labor Federation deal more realistically with its problems, deal more decisively with them, organize the unorganized on a wider scale, and exert some degree of independence from the Democratic Party. The union coalition that barely unseated the reactionary Lane Kirkland regime in 1995; the dozen unions that coalesced around the Labor Party movement in the 1990’s, and the unions that came together and ultimately split from the AFL-CIO to form the now moribund rival Change to Win federation in the 2,000’s. Progressives and militants played leading roles in all three efforts, although all three were unable to permanently establish themselves as sustained left alternatives to the ossified status quo.

In the wake of the failure of these three initiatives – so far as their goal of reinvigorating the overall labor federation – the left forces have dissipated and declined. The Bernie Sanders campaign rejuvenated some of these forces during his bid for the White House but have since scattered again in the wake of the Biden victory. With no pressure being brought to bear from the left, the entrenched conservatives in control of the Federation are unlikely to act on very much coming in the wake of the Convention, as history will attest. And on top of everything else, the apparent impending November election debacle facing the Democratic Party – and the likely return to power of an increasingly reactionary and anti-labor Republican Party – should be cause for alarm. With a Republican Party set to continue and expand its program of liquidating the trade unions one might have imagined the Federation willing to confront at least this

singular issue as an emergency, but no such program seems in evidence.

The situation in many of the affiliates is even more dire, as internal union polls regularly indicate that large swaths of union membership support Trumpism and its variants at the ballot box and in general. With the Federation unwilling to take on and lead the needed – and necessarily controversial political work of exposing the Right’s agenda – the affiliate unions are unlikely to go it alone and risk angering large sections of their memberships. Union after union refuses to engage their memberships in any meaningful trade union political education, instead abandoning this most urgent of tasks.

### **Labor Notes Conference Eclipses AFL Confab**

One very bright sign on the horizon besides the youth-led organizing upsets at Amazon, Starbucks, and MIT is the biennial Labor Notes conference which convened in Chicago just days after the AFL-CIO Convention. Run on a shoestring, more than 4,000 unionists gathered at the Labor Notes conference, twice as many as the all-expenses-paid attendance at the AFL confab. The evolving Labor Notes movement took root more than 40 years ago on the left fringes of the labor movement and today has grown to eclipse even the Federation itself in terms of the loyalty shown it by the activist elements across all unions and sectors.

The emerging younger, progressive, and more militant forces in some of the new organizing movements – as best illustrated by the Amazon, Starbucks, and MIT election wins – run counter to the AFL-CIO drift and decay. In some ways it offers parallels to the divide between new and old generations in the early years of the Committee for Industrial Organization, the predecessor of the eventual Congress of Industrial Organizations.

The recent Labor Notes conference featured addresses by Flight Attendants Union president Sara Nelson, Senator Bernie Sanders, and new Teamster President Sean O’Brien. In addition, union leaders and activists conducted workshops too numerous to count as virtually every aspect of labor’s crisis was debated and examined in the search for some way forward. The meeting stands out for its authentic energy and character, its decentralized structure, and its decidedly left political and militant union bent. Labor Notes has clearly carved-out and earned for itself the left pole of the labor movement and commands wide loyalty among the ranks. All signs point to a continued growth of this left flank.

### **William Z. Foster**

As far back as 1925 William Z. Foster warned that, “To bring the millions into the unions is necessary not only for the protection of the unorganized workers, and to further class ends in general, but also to safeguard the

life of the existing organizations.” Foster implored the progressives, the militants, and left forces within the unions to push, and push harder towards a goal of forcing the established bureaucracies in the labor movement to respond to the crisis as he saw them 100 years ago. That same counsel describes our collective dilemma today, with both the Federation and scores of union affiliates stumbling towards disaster and forfeiting the momentary improved conditions for aggressive trade union bargaining, strike action, and certainly for the initiation of mass campaigns to organize the many millions of unorganized workers.

Foster in his era was faced with many of the same business union pathologies as we face today regarding the need to revitalize the labor movement, and all serious participants in the current labor movement are well advised to acquaint themselves with his legacy. Foster correctly observed that, within the labor movement leadership, “The left wing militantly leads, the progressives mildly support, and the right wing opposes...The left wing alone has a realization of the tremendous social significance of the organization of the unorganized...” It should be noted that just 10 years after Foster’s admonition in the trade union low ebb of the Roaring Twenties to organize the unorganized the CIO was born; and just 16 years after the loss of the Great Steel Strike the mass strike waves that established the CIO were spreading like wildfire.

Things that look impossible today will be possible again, but not unless the left labor forces come together, build their numbers and reach, unify around a basic program of trade union revitalization, and work to compel the union leaderships to carry out the missions of the trade unions – and put an end to the disastrous AFL-CIO and affiliate union wandering in the wilderness. This work in the individual unions is urgent and critical if any progress is to be made at that level, and certainly no future progress will be possible at the Federation level absent these forces.

For those seeking Foster’s interpretation of the AFL shortcomings in his time frame see, “American Trade Unionism”, a collection of Foster’s writing spanning his career as a labor organizer. The book is published by International Publishers.

# Presentation by Chris Smalls to NY Conference: Against US Blockade of Cuba

By CHRISTIAN SMALLS, March 10 2023

Dear sisters and brothers, friends and fellow fighters of the US -Cuba Normalization Conference:

I'm sorry that other commitments keep me from joining you today as I am in Canada helping Amazon workers organize a union. Please accept this message from our leadership team at the Amazon Labor Union wishing you well in your deliberations and success in your actions to end the US blockade of Cuba and remove Cuba from Washington's list of so called terrorist nations.

The work you are doing shows the world the links between our government's domestic and foreign policies. The 60 year-long-blockade of Cuba, and the sanctions that Washington keeps piling on, betray its hostility to any enduring conquests by working people, here and abroad.

Labor law in the United States is stacked against working people, as we have seen with the National Labor Relations Board stalling on recognizing the ALU at JFK8 for 9 months. Neither Democrats nor Republicans represent workers interests.

Another example is the national contract imposed on our brothers and sisters in the rail unions last year. The entirely predictable disaster we saw February 3rd in E. Palestine, Ohio, is the result of the constant erosion of safety systems. The big rail companies have ignored the sensible warnings of rail workers over the years in the constant pursuit of super profits. But I tell you this: rail workers move the trains and do their best to keep us all safe—and I trust them more than anyone else. Likewise, the working conditions in Amazon's warehouses are deplorable and there have been many walkouts by workers from California to New York.

Washington's claim that it can apply its laws and military might anywhere around the world is the other side of the same coin. The economic persecution against Cuba is illegal and has been condemned by almost all countries of the world at the UN. It is a clear attempt to reverse the gains of the working people in Cuba, who took power in 1959 and have been an example to working people the world over. All the lies about Cuba come down to this: big business and their government hate the example of a small country where working people can actually decide their future!

We in ALU have learned how even after winning a representation election fair and square, powerful companies like Amazon can drag out the fight for months or years,

refusing to sit down to negotiate a contract, and hoping to weaken and ultimately defeat the union. They fire workers and union organizers, and legal action to get these workers their jobs back have not resulted in a single reinstatement. We now know that the NLRB is part of the problem, because they ultimately will not defend our interests.

That is why we have to keep fighting. We have to build a team of committed rank and file organizers who can win the trust of our fellow workers. We have to win the solidarity of other unions all over the US. We have to begin to function like a union and defend each and every Amazon employee. And finally, we have to build a democratic union that answers to the rank and file.

ALU stands with you. We should all oppose the cruel and undemocratic blockade, and ALL the additional sanctions Washington has imposed on Cuba illegally. We stand with our Cuban brothers and sisters, and we support your fight against the cruel and inhuman blockade that has been imposed on Cuba by all the US presidents for decades.

For this reason, we have a strong delegation of 10 ALU members and 3 members of CAUSE who are organizing Amazon in Raleigh, North Carolina, going to Cuba with the Los Angeles Labor and Activists delegation, invited by the Cuban Trade Union Federation and the International Committee for Friendship with the People. We look forward to learning from and sharing our experiences with Cuban workers at the docks and ports, at the fuel depot in Matanzas, in warehouses and factories with youth of the Federation of University Students, the Federation of Cuban Women and others. We will return with renewed strength to join with you to build solidarity with other labor unions in ending the blockade.

To quote Maurice Bishop, who led the Grenadian revolution until his assassination: FORWARD EVER!

**Chris Smalls – President of ALU**



## Strains Emerge Inside the Union That Beat Amazon

By NOAM SCHEIBER, March 21 2023

One year after its surprise victory at a Staten Island warehouse, the only union in the country representing Amazon workers has endured a series of setbacks and conflicts that have caused longtime supporters to question if it will survive.

In interviews, a dozen people who have been closely involved with the Amazon Labor Union said the union had made little progress bringing Amazon to the bargaining table, to say nothing of securing a contract. Many cited lopsided losses at two other warehouses, unstable funding and an internal feud that has made it difficult for the union to alter a strategy that they considered flawed.

At the heart of the feud is a dispute between the union's president, Christian Smalls, and several longtime organizers.

Mr. Smalls's former allies complain that he has pursued elections at other warehouses without strong support from workers or a plan to ensure victory. They say he has focused on travel and public appearances while neglecting the contract fight at the Staten Island warehouse, known as JFK8, where Amazon is still contesting the election result.

The critics, who include the union's former treasurer and its former organizing director, favor an alternative approach: amassing enough supporters to credibly threaten

a strike and pressure Amazon to negotiate. The process could take months but could increase the chances of winning a contract and collecting dues, without which the union is dependent on donations from other unions and third parties.

"We're talking to workers, having one-on-ones, growing our power in the building," said Tristian Martinez, a JFK8 employee who began helping Mr. Smalls organize workers early in the pandemic. "That's where it matters. Chris flying all over world is not going to make us get to a contract any sooner."

For his part, Mr. Smalls said that the union was continuing to push for a contract at JFK8, and that a strike threat was counterproductive because it would alarm workers who feared losing their incomes. Amazon had warned workers that unionizing could lead to a strike during which they wouldn't be paid.

"We're not going to play into that," he said in an interview.

He favors filing for elections at other warehouses without waiting to build majority support, he said, because such support can be fleeting amid high turnover among warehouse workers, and because the momentum and media attention created by an election filing can rally workers to the union's side.

Mr. Smalls called the revolt by his former allies an attempted coup and emphasized that many of the dissidents are white while the union leadership is largely Black, as are many workers. (Ruel Mohan, a mixed-race worker involved with the union who is one of the critics, said of the rift: "I didn't see anything that had to do with race.")



Christian Smalls, right, the Amazon Labor union president, at a rally Saturday outside an Amazon air hub in Kentucky. Union supporters are split over whether to organize additional sites or focus primarily on securing a contract at a Staten Island warehouse. Credit: Jon Cherry for The New York Times

At a tense union meeting in December, Mr. Smalls told longtime organizers that they should step aside if they couldn't get along with him or those loyal to him. "You got a problem with me? Deuces," he said, using a slang term for "goodbye." The two factions have been operating independently since the meeting.

While strategic debates and personal rivalries are not unusual in the labor movement, the stakes for the Amazon Labor Union are higher than most. Given the e-commerce giant's growing sway over industries including retail, groceries and health care, many strategists doubt that organized labor can reverse its decline without gaining traction at Amazon.

That would be a tall order for a union under any circumstances. But the Amazon Labor Union's fracturing has complicated the task. Labor's hopes of winning at Amazon now hinge on taking on one of the world's wealthiest companies — amid growing challenges within the union.

It was only days after the Staten Island victory that the union got its first hint of the struggle ahead. Amazon filed more than two dozen formal objections to the election result, which would tie the union up in hearings into the summer. The company soundly defeated the union in an election at a warehouse across the street the next month, and later restricted off-duty employees' access to break rooms, which organizers had relied on to recruit co-workers. Amazon said it had made the change to ensure employee safety and building security.

As a guerrilla leader who helped raise an insurgent army from a bus stop outside JFK8, Mr. Smalls had been dazzlingly effective. But he could appear shaky as the president of an organization that formally represented thousands of workers.

Though he was compelling in public appearances and proved adept at raising money from outside groups, he showed little interest in matters of governance or budgeting, three former officials said. Organizers struggled to reach him as he bounded between appointments in places like California, Texas, Nevada and Washington, D.C.

Finally, late last summer, the union appeared to find some stability. Jane McAlevey, a prominent organizer and an author who had been advising the group, led two intensive training sessions to help firm up support among JFK8 workers and pressure the company to negotiate.

According to several people who attended, the sessions lasted about six hours each and included role-playing about how to approach workers, techniques for tracking support within the warehouse and strategies for gradually ramping up protest actions, from circulating a petition up to a strike.

Just before Labor Day, a hearing officer for the National Labor Relations Board recommended dismissing Amazon's election challenge, a big step toward certifying the union's victory. A few weeks later, the company announced a raise of 25 to 75 cents an hour at the Staten Island warehouse, an increase whose limited size appeared to frustrate workers and increase interest in the union. At a union-sponsored barbecue soon after, many workers signed a petition demanding that Amazon provide an immediate cost-of-living increase.

But the momentum proved short-lived.

In October, workers at an Amazon warehouse in Southern California filed a petition for an election to join the Amazon Labor Union. In backing the petition, Mr. Smalls broke an agreement with Ms. McAlevey — reviewed by The New York Times — in which Mr. Smalls had committed to scale back his travel and refrain from backing elections at most other warehouses until the union was actively negotiating a contract on Staten Island.

"I was in that meeting," said Heather Goodall, the lead Amazon Labor Union organizer at a warehouse near Albany, N.Y., known as ALB1. Under the agreement, she said, "Christian couldn't travel, no more filing after ALB1." But "what does he do?" she continued. "He goes to L.A."

Ms. McAlevey withdrew from advising the union not long after. In an interview, Mr. Smalls argued that a worker-led movement should not turn down workers in other buildings, and that Ms. McAlevey's experience was not directly relevant to Amazon. (He appeared in Kentucky on Saturday to throw the union's support behind an organizing campaign at an Amazon air hub.)

In mid-October, the union lost an election at ALB1 by a roughly two-to-one ratio. Many Amazon Labor Union organizers and officials had worried that the election, which the union filed for in August, was another case in which Mr. Smalls overextended himself.

Ms. Goodall said that workers and organizers in Albany did not receive the support that Mr. Smalls had promised, and that his visits typically happened without much advance notice and were difficult to plan around.

Mr. Smalls said that the union's job was to enable workers in other buildings "to take a shot" but that it didn't control what happened there. "The leaders have to step up," he said. "They have to educate themselves."

In an Amazon Labor Union board meeting shortly after the election, organizers complained to Mr. Smalls that the Albany campaign had hurt perceptions of the union's competence, according to four people who were present. They pushed for a process to determine which warehouses the union would support and to add board members to make the union's leadership more responsive to their

concerns.

The loss “made organizing inside JFK8 harder,” said David-Desyrée Sherwood, a JFK8 worker who also served as a union organizer. “I had workers come up to me and ask, ‘What happened in Albany?’”

As the union prepared to meet again in December, Mr. Smalls appeared to be asserting more control, several workers and organizers recalled.

After winning an election, a union must file a constitution and bylaws with the Labor Department that typically lay out parameters like the method of selecting officers and the length of their terms. The Amazon Labor Union created a constitution in the fall of 2021, around the time it filed for an election at JFK8, and modified it after its victory.

Both versions were largely written by some of the current dissidents, including the union’s co-founder and former treasurer, Connor Spence, and they tended to give ordinary workers considerable influence, with low bars for running for office and amending the constitution.

But before the meeting in December, Mr. Smalls oversaw changes to the union’s constitution that restricted worker input in certain ways. Most notably, the document, on file with the U.S. Labor Department, delayed leadership elections that were to take place within a few months until after the union ratified a contract, a process that can take years if it happens at all.

“Going forward, here’s the structure,” Mr. Smalls said at the meeting, according to a recording shared with The Times. “If you can’t abide by this structure, that’s the door.”

Most of the volunteer organizers in the room walked out, according to a half-dozen people in attendance. Mr. Martinez, the longtime organizer, said he had told Mr. Smalls: “Chris, I cannot support this constitution. We are not leaving the A.L.U. by any means, but we do not agree with this.”

The union’s new director of organizing, Evangeline Byars, said it was pointless to have an election before the union had a more systematic way of interacting with workers in the building.

“Is it going to be democratic? No. Connor and them are just going to come into power,” said Ms. Byars, a former official at a local transit workers’ union.

Since the December meeting, the two factions have largely operated on separate tracks. The dissidents have continued to apply Ms. McAlevey’s organizing model, regularly talking to workers in each department, identifying supporters and potential organizers, and preparing for a

possible strike if Amazon refuses to bargain.

Mr. Smalls continues to travel widely — he has visited Atlanta, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and London this year, appearing at labor protests and speaking events — but attends union meetings regularly. Ms. Byars leads shop steward trainings and said 12 workers had completed the program so far. She said the union began a campaign in January to make JFK8 workers aware that they had access to workers’ compensation.

With no contract in sight, the union remains dependent on funding from outside groups whose appetite for donations appears uneven. The Omidyar Network, a liberal philanthropy group, recently contributed \$250,000 to a worker support and education fund affiliated with the union.

But a person familiar with the A.L.U.’s payroll who declined to be identified for fear of retribution said the union had at times been late distributing paychecks in recent months.

Mr. Smalls said paychecks could be delayed if the union missed its deadline for processing payroll. “Sometimes it happens because our treasurer is a worker,” he said, stressing that the union was financially sound.

But he acknowledged that the union’s funding was somewhat erratic. “It comes in waves,” he said. “We have to get donations. That’s what’s been keeping us afloat. That’s the reason I travel so much.”