

Worker Power at Amazon

Success could be MESSI.



BY PETER OLNEY AND RAND WILSON



Inter Miami's Lionel Messi in action during a Major League Soccer match against the Los Angeles Galaxy, Sunday, Sept. 3, 2022, in Los Angeles.

Credit: Ringo Chiu, via Shutterstock (shutterstock.com).

LAST OCTOBER, AMAZON WORKERS FROM NUMEROUS FACILITIES around the country met in Atlanta to plan and coordinate their actions. Workers at the meeting agreed that the daily grind of uniting their coworkers is enough to wear even the most dedicated organizers down. There's so much to do and keep track of. So as organizers go about the very difficult task of building worker power at Amazon, sometimes creating an acronym can help keep key concepts fresh in our minds.

The acronym we've come up with is attached to a popular sports hero: In September 2023, Lionel Messi, the Argentinian soccer superstar, led Inter Miami to victory against the Los Angeles Galaxy, the defending Major League Soccer (MLS) champions. The Miami team was on an 11-game winning streak since "Magician Messi," joined the club fresh off winning the World Cup for his home country. Although recently found guilty of tax evasion, he has also shown support for workers by, for example, refusing to cross a UNITE HERE Local 11 picket line in Los Angeles.

M.E.S.S.I. spells out what we believe are some of the key elements for organizers to keep in mind at this stage of building worker power at Amazon.

METRO — As evidenced in its shareholder letters, the company is especially vulnerable to collective action at the metropolitan level that could cripple its delivery capacity.

ECUMENICAL — Amazon employs over 850,000 workers in the United States alone. Its reach into logistics, retail, entertainment, and internet services is enormous and growing. No one union, community group, or political force will be capable of taking on this giant. It will require a broad multi-union, community, and political strategy to organize Amazon.

SECTORAL — Amazon is now the number one logistics provider. The recent Teamsters contract campaign at United Parcel Service (UPS) and the highly successful Stand-Up Strike by United Auto Workers (UAW) members offer rich lessons for Amazon workers about the power of on-the-job unity and collective

bargaining. Hopefully, these two campaigns will inspire more sectoral organizing at Amazon's wide-ranging operations

SALTING — There is no substitute for the presence of in-plant organizers who have the political commitment and organizational wherewithal to make building workers' power their life's mission. Committed salts are indispensable for a successful drive to organize Amazon.

INTERNATIONAL — Amazon already has extensive international operations, and it will continue to expand. Under the auspices of the Make Amazon Pay campaign and several union federations outside the United States, international solidarity and coordination are already blooming. Peak season dates like Black Friday and Cyber Monday have provided convenient markers for worldwide actions.

Below we review these concepts in more detail.

METRO:

Amazon's geographic vulnerability

In a letter to shareholders, Amazon CEO Andy Jassy spelled out some important changes in how the company is structuring its network. The new structure has important implications for workers seeking to build their power. Jassy wrote:

Until recently, Amazon operated one national US fulfillment network that distributed inventory from fulfillment centers spread across the entire country. If a local fulfillment center didn't have the product a customer ordered, we'd end up shipping it from other parts of the country, costing us more and increasing delivery times.... Last year, we started rearchitecting our inventory placement strategy and leveraging our larger fulfillment center footprint to move from a national fulfillment network to a regionalized network model. We made significant internal changes (e.g. placement and logistics software, processes, physical operations) to create eight interconnected regions in smaller geographic areas. Each of these regions has broad, relevant selection to operate in a largely self-sufficient way, while still being able to ship nationally when necessary.

Amazon's new distribution model opens up opportunities for effective organizing at the regional level. This means, as one Amazon organizer put it, "In the event of a short duration strike across enough key facilities in a region, we are presumably looking at massive disruption." (We are withholding the organizer's identity to discuss

sensitive organizing strategy.) Thus, if organizers can build enough strength in a given region, their actions might be more effective than in the past at crippling Amazon's distribution network, at least in the short term in that region. The Teamsters union has grasped the "metro strategy" and is forcefully implementing a program in Southern California, a hub of Amazon logistics because of the giant ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and the huge regional market.

Labor strategist Kim Moody has observed that Amazon is now primarily a logistics firm engaged in moving products, a process in which sales are only one step. The company's "rapid movement from fulfillment center to sortation center to delivery station, next-day delivery, and the development of its fleet of trucks and vans are now central to its business model and a key reason why Amazon resists unionization so adamantly."

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Amazon's constant effort to run at full capacity is a necessity because speed is essential to reduce inventory turnover time and obtain the highest profits possible. The challenge for organizers is to better understand how Amazon's structure, and the way it moves goods, might better inform future worker actions by revealing where the company's points of vulnerability are.

Moody believes (as do most of us) that, "the sophisticated choreography of algorithms and the speed of movement they demand, can make the impact of the actions (or inactions) of most workers more immediate, more disruptive, and more difficult to undo because time (and hence value) lost cannot be regained when things are already moving at maximum speed."

Put plainly, even small actions by Amazon workers can have large repercussions for productivity and profits. Moody sums up by saying, "In the endless fight to survive work, it is not always necessary to close things down completely to snatch a victory." >>

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Amazon acknowledged this vulnerability in its 2018 annual report to the Securities and Exchange Commission citing “labor disputes” as a possible risk to its “ability to receive inbound inventory efficiently and ship completed orders to customers.” Amazon listed this potential to disrupt their business even before terrorism and acts of God.

ECUMENICAL:

Organizations in logistics and the Amazon landscape

Historically, the Teamsters union has been the major player in over-the-road trucking, and in small parcel delivery with its massive 340,000-member UPS agreement. But it’s not the only union uniting workers in the logistics supply chain.

The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) represent dockworkers on the West and East coasts, respectively. The 13 railroad craft unions unite more than 133,000 employees in the national freight

industry, moving 40% of U.S. Gross National Product. These unions play a crucial role in moving Amazon’s freight. While Amazon now has its own fleet of air cargo planes, other airfreight carriers (UPS, DHL, and FedEx) still play an important role in handling Amazon’s goods.

In addition to the Teamsters, three other unions have been supporting campaigns to build workers’ power at Amazon:

- The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), a division of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), was the first union to seek collective bargaining rights at Amazon’s fulfillment center in Bessemer, Ala.
- The American Postal Workers Union (APWU) has been supporting organizing committees at several facilities. Amazon presents a major challenge to the increased wages and improved working conditions that the APWU has achieved within the U.S. Postal Service. The postal service is obligated to provide universal service and

A Night in the Life of an Amazon Warehouse Worker

BY ROSE BAKER

February 2021

11:45 p.m.: The trill of my alarm startles me awake from my nap. I’ve been sleeping since 8 p.m. I wipe my eyes and turn on my bedroom lights, rolling out of bed in the leggings and t-shirt I went to sleep in to minimize my time getting ready. My hair goes up in a ponytail.

I quickly fill up a Thermos of coffee and eat a small snack before putting on my safety shoes and getting in my car.

12:13 a.m.: I pull into the parking lot and clock in from my car using the Amazon employee app, AtoZ. This is technically not allowed, but I do it anyway. The walk from my car to the warehouse door is a couple minutes, and I

worry about being late. I’m here for the night shift, which runs from around 12:15 a.m. to 3:15 a.m. each night.

I picked up the shift because of the \$2 hourly bonus that occasionally appears for night shifts on AtoZ, and because it can be easier to talk to co-workers on the night shift when the warehouse is less busy and fewer managers are running around.

I scan my badge to walk through the turnstiles, strolling through the breakroom and the body temperature scanner before arriving on the warehouse floor. The scanner is one of the company’s feeble attempts to identify employees who may be positive for Covid-19—it also triggers an alert when it identifies workers standing closer than three feet apart. I make my way over to the giant TV screen displaying all employees’ assignments for the day.

I scan my badge underneath the TV, and my assignment appears in bold letters on the screen: “INBOUND.”

1:02 a.m.: I’ve been taking boxes from the semitruck and unloading them onto a conveyor belt for nearly an hour. I’m alone in the truck, humming to myself and wishing I were brave enough to try tucking my earbuds underneath a neck gaiter like some of my coworkers. I’m rapidly moving the boxes, being sure to place the labels facing upwards.

Boxes of dog food, cases of water, and Zinus mattresses are always the hardest. These overweight boxes—some weighing around 80 pounds—have a tendency to fall over in the truck. There are technically supposed to be two people to a belt, one unloading the truck and one taking the overweight boxes. But on the night shift, I’m alone.

delivers Amazon packages in most of rural America.

- An independent union, the Amazon Labor Union, stunned Amazon and the entire labor world by winning an NLRB representation election in 2022 at JFK8, the Staten Island Fulfillment Center.

Beyond the established unions, there are networks and worker centers supporting Amazon workers:

- Amazonians United (AU), a national network that also includes Canada, has set down roots in multiple Amazon facilities. AU has developed a “metro” presence in several key Amazon markets. AU is building organizing committees in warehouses to use protest actions and strikes to win better wages and working conditions.
- Athena is a national network bringing many organizations together to stop Amazon’s growing, powerful grip over our society and economy. Athena’s work includes supporting

several warehouse organizing initiatives and worker centers while also engaging with Amazon on the political and policy level.

It will take the combined efforts of unions, worker centers, and other initiatives with broad community, political, and regulatory support to gain sufficient worker power to impact wages and working conditions at Amazon. The thought of one union or organization establishing exclusive jurisdiction with Amazon workers is premature (and likely disastrous).

It’s important to recognize that these unions, workers centers, and other groups will pursue different strategies to gain power. There will be many successes—and failures. We need to be open-minded about what is the “right” or “best” approach. *Let a hundred flowers bloom!*

SECTORAL

The UPS contract campaign is a good example

Building a working-class movement inside Amazon is about a lot more than understanding the technical points of workers’ power. It requires mass democratic involvement inside and beyond the workplace. >>

1:45 a.m.: A loud, monotone beep rings through the warehouse as the clock hits 1:45 a.m. It’s my breaktime. I have 15 minutes—up from 10 minutes, after Amazon workers at a different warehouse fought for an additional five minutes of break time to make up for how long it takes to walk across the warehouse to get to the break areas.

I walk to the break area, a sectioned-off portion of the warehouse with white plastic folding tables and chairs. Employees have to sit at these tables alone—social distancing. I spend my break scrolling blankly on social media.

2:45 a.m.: Thirty minutes before I expect to clock out, I hear shouts echoing throughout the warehouse. “FLEX UP! THIRTY MINUTES!”

A Process Assistant, identified by his yellow safety vest with orange trim, walks up and down the warehouse aisle, his hands cupped around his

mouth to project his voice. Process Assistants, or PAs, are the lowest-level floor supervisors in the building. For about an additional \$2 an hour, they become the largely hands-off management, occasionally moving workers to different assignments or keeping an eye out for anyone sneaking a peek at their phone.

The end time of the shift has been pushed back by an additional thirty minutes—we’re working mandatory overtime. Amazon shifts at my building are scheduled for three hours but can be “flexed up” to four, given demand. The mandatory overtime is paid at the standard rate.

My co-workers have complained that the unpredictability of the “flex” schedule has been difficult to handle; those I’ve worked with during day shifts have been unexpectedly late to pick up their children from school or attend court hearings as a result.

3:46 a.m.: My shifts are short, but they feel unbearably long. I scan my badge near the door and finally leave the warehouse. The sky is just as dark as it was when I clocked in.



At the early onset of the pandemic, shop-floor organizers pushed for hazard pay, personal protective equipment (PPE), and other increases in safety protections for workers at Amazon warehouses across the country. In fact, a Covid-19 safety walkout in March 2020 at JFK8, the Amazon warehouse in Staten Island, was the first major action at an Amazon fulfillment center—and the first step in the eventual unionization at JFK8, the first successful union drive at an Amazon warehouse in the United States.

But after these actions, Amazon began implementing new social-distancing policies that prevented >>

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Democratic organization and decision-making are essential to effective worker coordination.

Fortunately, we just had a perfect example of what “democratic organization and decision-making” by workers in the logistics industry is capable of accomplishing. In 2023, the Teamsters at UPS reached an agreement with management to substantially raise pay, eliminate a lower-paid driver classification, phase in air conditioning in delivery trucks, and create 7,500 new full-time jobs.

The new UPS agreement is a clear example of the benefits of collective bargaining and of how workers can organize to win. Sorters and loaders won hourly increases between \$8.40 (a 47% pay increase) and \$9.10 (a 55% pay increase) depending on their length of service. Within five years, UPS warehouse workers will make between \$25.75 and \$35.89 an hour with significant additional compensation via a defined-benefit pension and fully paid health care plans.

These gains were achieved through a one-year contract campaign that involved thousands of rank-and-file members and union leaders working to unite nearly 340,000 Teamsters members who work at UPS. The campaign built a “credible strike threat” leading to improved terms and conditions for members using extensive membership involvement, political and economic leverage, and public support.

What are the relevant lessons for Amazon workers from the Teamsters’ contract campaign? How can Amazon organizers use the example provided by the win at UPS to educate and inspire their coworkers to demand better pay and benefits, safer working conditions, and so much more?

Lessons for Amazon workers

The Teamsters settlement with UPS was not simply good for UPS workers, it was good for all workers. First, now that UPS workers earn significantly higher wages than their counterparts at FedEx and Amazon, there is pressure on management at both companies to raise wages accordingly.

workers from talking to one another on breaks or otherwise. Despite still working in close proximity — for example, while doing team lifts on overweight boxes—Amazon attempted to claim its anti-social policies of only allowing one worker per table at the break rooms, divided by plastic barriers, were in workers’ own interest.

When I worked at Amazon through the height of the pandemic, I often marveled at how Amazon was able to make such a large warehouse with hundreds of people inside feel so isolating. If I needed to make adjustments to my work schedule, there was nobody on-site that I could speak to. Even the rotating human resource managers, pacing the warehouse once a week in purple vests, would tell me they had no control over my schedule, and I would have to put in requests online. My online schedule change requests were denied constantly. And the worst part of all was that I didn’t have a human being to speak to

in order to ask for additional help or even to address my frustration.

Amazon does this on purpose; instead of a boss, I had a robot. You can organize a march on the boss, but you can’t quite organize a march on the robot. If my co-workers and I wanted to protest or petition a workplace policy, we wouldn’t even know who to direct it to.

I stopped working at Amazon three years ago now, and since then, Amazon has reportedly changed much of its operations. Amazon opened nearly 250 new warehouses in 2022. Since 2020, Amazon’s parcel volume has surpassed FedEx and is neck and neck with UPS. UPS workers are union members represented by the Teamsters; Amazon’s starting pay for part-time warehouse workers is over \$3 less hourly than UPS, with a significantly higher differential for drivers.

But as the company grows, Amazon workers across the country

have continued to fight back against low wages and dangerous working conditions. Workers at the KCVG air hub in Kentucky are currently organizing to join the Amazon Labor Union, calling for \$30 an hour starting pay, 180 hours of paid time off, optional flex-ups at double pay, and more. After protests led by the independent Amazonians United at the DBK4 building in Queens, New York, Amazon workers won the right to wear one earbud—no more hiding under neck gaiters and risk of discipline or even on-the-spot termination.

Amazon may be expanding, but organizing at Amazon is growing, too, as workers take their health, safety, and dignity into their own hands. **D&S**

ROSE BAKER worked in an Amazon warehouse in California in 2020 and 2021.

Second, labor militancy was shown to be effective. The Teamsters' new president, Sean O'Brien, did not mince words when he told CNN in 2022, "we're not going to be afraid to pull the trigger [on a strike] if necessary." Teamsters used the campaign to highlight the dangerous heat conditions under which many UPS workers were forced to work and how a two-tier driver classification hurt morale and productivity. Then, when talks broke down in July, members began "practice picketing," illustrating the membership's unity and willingness to strike with the tagline: "Just practicing for a just contract." The pickets garnered a lot of media attention and showed that members were united behind the contract goals that union leaders on the national negotiating committee were demanding.

A third lesson is that solidarity is critical. When UPS held out on increasing wages for part-time workers, the Teamsters walked away and began their practice strikes, betting that the company would cave. Instead of settling for a small increase for part-timers like many past agreements, the union held out for a better deal and won a starting pay rate of \$21 an hour, up from \$16.20 an hour.

The Teamsters campaign showed how workers can find power in numbers, be militant, stand up for one another, and improve their wages and working conditions.

Using the win at UPS to educate (and inspire) coworkers

Judging from what we've heard from Amazon workers from past campaigns, most workers are not paying very close attention to developments at other Amazon facilities, much less at other companies like UPS.

That means the first task is to bring the wins at UPS (and the UAW in the auto industry) to the shop floor and make them a source of inspiration or constructive agitation for coworkers at Amazon.

A good example is the "wage comparison chart" that Amazonians United in the Philadelphia area made to highlight the wage differential between UPS and Amazon. Further opportunities have arisen since the Stand-Up Strike against the Big Three automakers. In the wake of the Big Three's settlement with the UAW, Hyundai, Honda, and Toyota all significantly raised the wages of their workers in U.S.-based, nonunion plants out of fear that they would join the UAW and organize.

SALTING

Amazon workers need your help!

While the lessons from the UPS contract campaign are valuable, good contract campaigns and big gains from collective bargaining seldom organize workers on their own. They can inspire and teach, but deep organizing requires deeply committed in-plant organizers.

When the UAW succeeded in organizing Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler in 1942, it resulted in a membership gain of about 324,000 members—a huge increase, but still dwarfed by Amazon, with over 850,000 U.S. employees.

The big union wins in the auto industry benefited from the in-plant organizing of many progressive and socialist cadres who embedded themselves in auto plants for many years. These "salts" carried the union message, built in-plant organization, and eventually sparked industrial uprisings.

The big union wins in the auto industry benefited from the in-plant organizing of many progressive and socialist cadres who embedded themselves in auto plants for many years. These "salts," or industrializers, carried the union message, built in-plant organization, and eventually sparked industrial uprisings. The small number of salts throughout Amazon has already enabled some important strategic questioning and thinking about strategy. For example, regarding organizing strategy one dedicated Amazon salt wrote:

I think the metro strategy, at this point, is at least as much about building and sustaining better organizing committees than about getting actual leverage vs. Amazon in a strike situation—but hopefully it's also laying the groundwork for the later in the future.

Prospective salts should also look beyond the sorting, loading, and driving jobs at Amazon. As attention focuses on the introduction of robots to Amazon warehouses, who will repair and maintain the robots? Salts should consider getting jobs as technicians and mechanics. Good news: *Amazon*



will even pay for the training! Jobs writing the algorithms or working at the very profitable Amazon Web Services could also be very strategic.

INTERNATIONAL

Over the last several years there have been international actions led by Make Amazon Pay and UNI Global Union on Black Friday. While labor regimes and cultures of other countries are different than here in the United States, and in many cases provide for a more powerful labor presence at Amazon, nowhere in the world has any union effectively tamed the Amazon beast. U.S. workers have much to learn from their Amazon coworkers abroad; at the same time because the United States is at the center of Amazon's operations, we have much to contribute. Taking coordinated action internationally will be an important way to maximize our impact.

Messi is a great soccer player and a worldwide icon. MESSI is our acronym to sum up some of the key concepts for taking on Amazon effectively in North America. Use it if it's useful or feel free to invent your own!

As mentioned earlier in this article, AU, APWU, Athena, RWDSU, and the Teamsters helped convene a weekend meeting of 55 Amazon shop floor organizers from 22 workplace-organizing committees. The meeting took place last year about a month before Black Friday—when groups traditionally take action during the peak shipping season and the height of Amazon's vulnerability.

At the meeting, organizers described their local struggles, and compared their approaches to building power. Not everyone shared the same approach or even the same objectives. But everyone recognized that when the time comes to take on management and fight the company, we will need labor unity and strong support from all of our allies.

Organizers left the meeting committed to taking coordinated actions and building more communication and trust between local groups. It led to the largest increase in shop floor actions and strikes during the 2023 peak shipping season.

With Amazon's impact touching nearly every aspect of our lives, we need far more coordinated actions by Amazon workers. Hopefully, many more organizing committees will emerge in the coming years to enter the fray. The work will

occasionally be “messy,” with internal disagreements on tactics and strategy. However, these are essential growing pains if we are to succeed at building a powerful response to Amazon's shameful hyper-exploitation of workers. **D&S**

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RAND WILSON has worked as a union organizer for various unions for over 40 years. He worked for the Teamsters union on the historic 1997 UPS strike and more recently for Teamsters for a Democratic Union on the 2023 UPS contract campaign. Wilson was the founding director of Massachusetts Jobs with Justice, and co-founder of Labor for Bernie.

SOURCES: Suhauna Hussain, “Soccer star won't cross hotel picket line,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 2023 (latimes.com); Andy Jassy, “CEO Andy Jassy's 2022 Letter to Shareholders,” April 13, 2023, Amazon (aboutamazon.com); Kim Moody, “Turnover Time: Changing Contours in the Movement of Capital,” *Spectre Journal*, May 4, 2023 (spectrejournal.com); Securities and Exchange Commission, Amazon.Com, Inc. Form 10-K, For the fiscal year ended December 31, 2018 (sec.gov); Securities and Exchange Commission, Amazon.Com, Inc. Form 10-K, For the fiscal year ended December 31, 2021 (sec.gov); International Brotherhood of Teamsters (teamster.org); International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ilwu.org); International Longshoremen's Association (ilaunion.org) Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO, (tttd.org); Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (rwdsu.info); American Postal Workers Union (apwu.org); Amazon Labor Union (amazonlaborunion.org); Amazonians United (amazoniansunited.org); Mitchell Clark, “Amazon workers in New York and Maryland are protesting for better wages,” *The Verge*, March 16, 2022 (theverge.com); “This new union boss could start the biggest strike in decades,” *CNN*, March 22, 2022 (cnn.com); Athena (athenaforall.org); David Streitfeld, “Activists Build a Grass-Roots Alliance Against Amazon,” *New York Times*, November 26, 2019 (nytimes.com); Luis Feliz Leon, “Wage Gains at UPS Have Amazon Workers Demanding More,” *Labor Notes*, August 3, 2023 (labornotes.org); Harold Meyerson, “Will the Teamsters' Gains at UPS Help Them Unionize Amazon?” *The American Prospect*, July 27, 2023 (prospect.org); Peter Olney and Rand Wilson, “It's Time for Salting to Make a Comeback,” *Jacobin*, July 26, 2022 (jacobin.com); Rand Wilson and Peter Olney, “Two old salts say get a job at Amazon,” *Stansbury Forum*, October 19, 2018 (stansburyforum.com); Connie Chen, “An Amazon apprenticeship program pays employees to gain skills and learn about robotics,” *Amazon*, May 4, 2023 (aboutamazon.com); Peter Olney and Rand Wilson, “Global Actions on Black Friday Unite Workers to ‘Make Amazon Pay,’” *Labor Notes*, December 14, 2022 (labornotes.org); David Madland, “Lessons From Italian Unions' Historic Agreement With Amazon,” *Center for American Progress Action*, May 13, 2022 (americanprogressaction.org).