Compiled by Red Owl & Level Ground Productions

A SCREENING & DISCUSSION GUIDE



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"A document of solidarity, in which the scandal of the gig-economy model registers on a human scale."

DOREEN ST. FÉLIX, THE NEW YORKER

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Special thanks to the Amazon Labor Union

Using This Guide

This discussion guide is designed to give you the tools you need to host a screening of UNION that meets your specific goals. The intention is for this guide to be a wide buffet of resources to support productive dialogue, action, and education around the film's central issues. We encourage you to read through, consider, and pull from content in any section or sections that best suit your screening event. It is not expected, nor likely that you will be able to include all the prompts, resources, or materials present in this guide at your event. You are encouraged to take what makes sense for your screening event and leave the rest.

For more ways to take action, resources, a glossary of terms, and a full bibliography, see our <u>reference materials</u>. Or <u>request a screening</u> of the movie.

About The Film

UNION chronicles an unlikely group of warehouse workers as they launch a grassroots UNION campaign at an Amazon fulfillment center in Staten Island, New York. The odds are stacked against them, as they find themselves up against a tech industry giant with unlimited resources, without major support from national unions or politicians, and while navigating internal divisions within their own ranks.

"Captures both the pain and the power of people at the base of the global infrastructure."

ISAAC FELDBERG, ROGEREBERT.COM

A Note From The Filmmakers

We began working on this film in the summer of 2020, several months into the global COVID-19 pandemic and amidst massive uprisings in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd. This period of time, so characterized by fear and uncertainty, also made some things undeniably clear: like the hierarchies of power which determine that some lives matter more than others. The creation of the category of "essential work" required that certain people risk their lives (often with no additional benefits) to show up to their jobs in order to maintain the safety and comfort of those lucky enough to remain at home. In March of 2020, then Amazon worker Chris Smalls and his co-workers Jason Anthony, Gerald Bryson, Jordan Flowers, and Derrick Palmer, walked off the job to protest the lack of COVID-19 safety in their Staten Island warehouse. We saw this act as an incredibly courageous and admirable rejection of those hierarchies of power. Two years later, this initial act transformed into the ambitious and unprecedented goal of unionizing their 8,000 worker warehouse. Such a task was considered impossible - until, they did it.

Since the height of union membership in the 1950s and 1960s, globalization and deindustrialization have sent the U.S. labor movement into steep decline. No company better exemplifies the twin economic trends of union-busting and supply chain globalization than Amazon. In the same way Ford revolutionized labor in the 20th century, Amazon is actively setting workplace standards defined by automation, surveillance, and constant turnover. To challenge Amazon is to challenge the future of work we are currently hurtling towards.

"No company better exemplifies the twin economic trends of union-busting and supply chain globalization than Amazon."

When we began filming at the start of the Amazon Labor Union's (ALU) campaign in 2021, we had no idea whether or not they would win their election (and the odds were certainly

not in their favor). But it didn't matter either way, because it was the effort itself that held so much meaning. The formidable sacrifice and endurance to show up after a 12 hour shift, day or night, through rain, heat, or snow, for the unrewarding and unglamorous work of organizing. The creativity and commitment demonstrated by this multi-racial, multi-class, multi-generational coalition felt electric to witness. Perhaps most moving was how the ALU combatted the purposeful alienation and dehumanization inherent in a workplace like Amazon - cultivating instead a sense of family, belonging, and dignity amongst their co-workers.

Following their extraordinary victory, the story of the ALU is often framed as a classic "David vs. Goliath" narrative. But spending three years embedded in their efforts, we witnessed a more complicated picture. Throughout production, we felt torn between the exciting potential of collective power and the sober assessment of just how massive the obstacles are in the way of transformative change. Now, while materially it feels that little has changed since 2020, and in certain respects, conditions have become more dire - we cannot take for granted the massive shift in consciousness and fiery spark of resurgent energy in the labor movement as a powerful, immeasurable force to be reckoned with. We invite our audiences to wrestle with these contradictions, and like the ALU, to tap into your own creativity, energy, and desire for a better collective future.

SAMANTHA CURLEY, MARTIN DICICCO, STEPHEN MAING, BRETT STORY, MARS VERRONE

(Directors & Producers of UNION)

Key Participants (1/2)

LISTED IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE





TRISTIAN



MAT



KAREN



JUSTINE



JOSIAH



MITCH



MICHAEL



BRIMA



NANNETTE

Historical Background & Current Stakes

ORIGINS & "GOLDEN AGE" OF THE U.S. LABOR MOVEMENT

* For a full bibliography of sources, see reference materials. Labor has been central to the development of United States culture and society since European colonizers forcibly migrated indentured servants and enslaved African peoples to Jamestown in 1619. Important differences between forced labor of enslaved people and of free wage labor laid the foundation for highlighting gross inequities between workers. Eighteen years following the United States' establishment as an independent nation, the need to protect the interests and safety of laborers amplified as the Industrial Revolution emerged and the first guild of skilled laborers - the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers - was formed in Philadelphia.



The origins of today's labor movement can be seen in the wake of the Civil War (1861-1865). In the roughly hundred years or so that followed, many foundational labor precedents and institutions took shape, constituting a "golden age" of labor organizing. Early labor movements, such as the formation of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1886, focused on skilled workers and aimed to secure higher wages, shorter workdays,

and improved working conditions. Workers recognized that organizing together was a powerful strategy towards advocating and securing their rights through collective bargaining. The labor movement also gained significant momentum through major strikes, such as the Pullman Strike of 1894 and the Great Steel Strike of 1919.

¹History.com, "Labor Movement." By the end of World War II in 1945, more than 12 million workers belonged to unions and union strategies like collective bargaining had taken hold throughout the industrial economy. By the mid-20th century, unions had catapulted the U.S. from a period of child labor and dangerous factory conditions into one of the greatest periods of national economic health, in which workers experienced a higher share of the wealth and improved safety on the job. Other major gains (often taken for granted today) included: the two-day weekend, overtime pay, minimum wage, paid vacation and holidays, sick leave, worker healthcare, anti-discrimination protections, safety regulations, and the right to strike.

"Workers recognized that organizing together was a powerful strategy towards advocating and securing their rights through collective bargaining."

DECLINE OF THE U.S. LABOR MOVEMENT

The 1970s onward marked a restructuring of the global industrial economy and new, coordinated attacks on unions and workers' rights. Neoliberalism, a form of governance that values free-market principles, deregulation, privatization, disinvestment from social welfare provisions, and a reduced role for government in economic affairs coupled with attacks on organized labor, gained prominence in the 1980s. Under Ronald Reagan's administration brutal anti-labor policies were initiated and the administration launched broad assaults on unions by firing over 11,000 striking air traffic controllers.

Policy changes, weakening of the public sector and social support for workers, as well as economic globalization and outsourcing served to benefit corporations' profit and as CEOs were structurally supported to focus on their bottom line, workers and union memberships suffered. People with power, such as bosses and politicians supporting them, placed more value on profits at the expense of providing workers with safe and sustainable careers.

Forced into precarious positions, between 1975 and 1985, fewer workers joined unions and membership decreased by 5 million. Neoliberalism reshaped the economy in ways that were highly unfavorable to labor unions, weakening their bargaining power, reducing union membership, and shifting the focus away from collective bargaining in favor of market-driven solutions

The early 2000s were a period of both struggle and adaptation for the U.S. labor movement. Traditional unions faced challenges such as declining membership, political opposition, and the loss of manufacturing jobs, while new forms of worker organizing and a focus on immigrant workers and low-wage jobs began to emerge as a response to the changing economy. The movement had to innovate and adapt, even as it fought to retain its relevance in an increasingly globalized and politically hostile environment.

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Union Members Summary."

From 2000 to 2010 the rise of the internet and big-tech coupled with neoliberal values and the Great Recession's unemployment crisis from 2007-2009, ushered in a boom of non-union, low-wage, service jobs and the rise of gig-economy work. The gig-economy, characterized by short-term, flexible, and often precarious work arrangements was popularized through digital platforms and positioned as a solution to the very precarity and joblessness economic rhythms had produced. This turn towards gig labor has had a continued and significant impact on the decline of the US labor movement which has been directly connected to stagnating wages, rising income inequality, more dangerous working conditions, and the erosion of democratic institutions. Today, union membership has dropped to a historic low of 9.9%.2



COVID-19 PANDEMIC & "ESSENTIAL" WORK

³ MCCallum, "Pandemic Changed Labor Organizing."

⁴Selyukh, "Walmart Hires Quarter-Million."

⁵Kinder et al., "Amazon Walmart raked billion."

While the assault on working-class Americans has been decades in the making, the sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing disparities. A 2020 study found that in thousands of U.S. counties, income inequality was associated with more cases and more deaths by the virus.3 Low-income Black, disabled, and immunocompromised workers faced particular hardship. As the pandemic shut down much of the economy and certain workplaces transitioned to a "work-from-home" model, millions of frontline "essential" workers remained on the job providing services which typically included healthcare, food service, and public transportation. Despite being categorized as "essential," many workers in these industries did not receive basic health and safety measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus, and as a result, were infected and died at disproportionate rates. Additionally, retail companies like Amazon and Walmart were able to designate their workplaces as "essential," needlessly forcing their employees into dangerous environments without providing any necessary public service. During the pandemic, these two companies increased their workforces by over 700,000⁴ and collectively earned over \$10 billion in profits.5

"A 2020 study found that in thousands of U.S. counties, income inequality was associated with more cases and more deaths by the virus."

⁶Blest, "Leaked Amazon Memo." While Amazon workers risked their lives in warehouses, ironically processing COVID-19 safety equipment they themselves did not have access to, Amazon's profits soared as e-commerce became the main shopping option for guarantined consumers. It was in this context that on March 30, 2020, Chris Smalls and his co-workers Jason Anthony, Gerald Bryson, Jordan Flowers and Derrick Palmer walked off the job at their Amazon fulfillment center to protest the lack of COVID-19 safety precautions and equipment in the facility. Within 2 hours of the walkout, Smalls was terminated and days later a leaked memo from an Amazon executive meeting revealed a planned smear campaign: "He's not smart, or articulate, and to the extent the press wants to focus on us versus him, we will be in a much stronger PR position than simply explaining for the umpteenth time how we're trying to protect workers." ⁶ This was the catalyzing event that would lead to the Amazon Labor Union's formation as an independent union in 2021 and their historic campaign in which they became the first group to unionize an Amazon warehouse in the U.S in 2022.

AMAZON & THE FUTURE OF WORK

For years, Amazon has been a major target of the U.S. labor movement. In the 20th century, organizing basic industries like coal, steel, and automobile manufacturing was key to building a strong movement. Today, Amazon workers occupy the same strategic position. Over the last three decades, Jeff Bezos has strategically built a massive monopoly, from an online bookstore to one of the largest publicly traded companies in the world. In the company's early days, as Amazon started attracting customers and expanding product offerings beyond books, Bezos played the long game by reinvesting Amazon's earnings in the business. For over a decade, Amazon operated at a loss and its profit margins remained slim. To expand, Amazon used "predatory pricing" and other anti-competitive tactics to provide goods and services below cost to drive competitors out of business and dominate the markets it operated in, squeeze third-party sellers on its platform, and extract public subsidies from state governments across the United States. Today, Jeff Bezos is one of the wealthiest billionaires in the world and Amazon's market cap/net worth is almost 2 trillion dollars, greater than many countries' combined Gross Domestic Product (the measure of a country's total economic output).



⁷Rosenblum, "No Future Labor" Amazon employs 1.5 million people across the globe, and the company increasingly plays a central role in global distribution and logistics systems (i.e. transportation, storage, and management of global supply chain), as well as in the tech sector through Amazon Web Services' dominant role in cloud computing⁷. Given Amazon's central role in shaping the global economy and workforce, reining in Amazon's power through worker organizing is

critical to our political and economic futures. This single company controls much of the Internet's infrastructure, dictates the terms of online retail globally, provides technology services to repressive military and immigration enforcement forces, has the power to reshape entire cities and communities, produces a massive carbon footprint, and undermines democracy to serve its own corporate interests.

Anti-unionism is part of Amazon's philosophy and business model. The company claims to be a worker-friendly environment, with competitive salary and benefits that render a union unnecessary. Amazon warehouse and delivery jobs are intended to be temporary, generating a constant churn of employees. Amazon's annual employee turnover rate is double the industry standard at 150% per year (in other words, on average, for every 10 workers hired in a year, 15 are fired or quit). While Bezos sought this constant turnover to avoid a "march to mediocrity," much of the reason workers are fired or quit is due to the extremely demanding and exploitative nature of the work. As seen in UNION, Amazon's surveillance technology has enabled the employer to enforce a work pace with no room for inefficiency, squeezing every ounce of downtime out of workers' days. Under this immense pressure, workers frequently report feeling isolated, intimidated, dehumanized and "like a robot."

⁷Kim, "Amazon manipulated injury

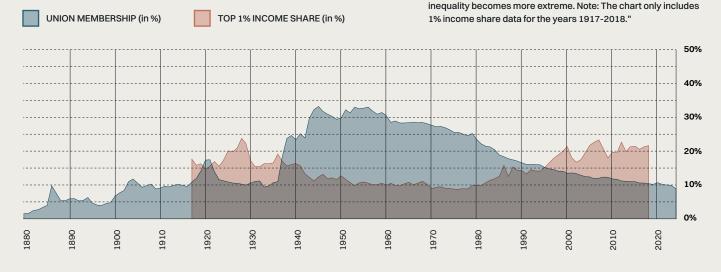
Long shifts, minimal breaks, repetitive motions, and push for speed also take a significant physical toll on workers. A Senate investigation found that Amazon workers were nearly twice as likely to be injured compared to workers at other warehouses in the industry.8 As a result of this unsustainable working environment, many employees cannot keep the job and do not get to enjoy the benefits touted by the company. Historically, when workers attempt to push back and organize, Amazon has consistently met such efforts with aggressive and well-resourced union-busting tactics and flagrant disregard for labor law. Along with Elon Musk's SpaceX and Trader Joe's, Amazon is now part of an active legal case to sue the National Labor Relations Board and rule it as unconstitutional. Amazon's influence is widespread and to remain competitive with Amazon, industry peers are being forced to adopt similar harmful practices towards workers. In this way, Amazon is actively setting the standard for a future of work defined by automation, dehumanization, surveillance, lack of safety, and precarious employment.

RESURGENCE OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT

As seen in UNION, the task of organizing Amazon workers has been incredibly daunting, and equally necessary in order to address one of the greatest existential threats of our time. Recognizing common experiences, workers participating in the current resurgence of the labor movement, largely helmed by young workers of color engaging in grassroots, bottom-up organizing campaigns that connect across a variety of social justice issues remind us of the inherent power of the people and of collectivizing. The pandemic starkly revealed labor injustices that have persisted for generations and shifted the national conversation about worker rights in ways previous decades have failed to do. Landmark victories like the Amazon Labor Union's and the wave of Starbucks stores unionizing across the country, have signaled to workers everywhere that organizing is possible even at the most powerful and viciously anti-union companies. While union membership is at an all-time low, public approval of unions is at an all-time high. Although the future of the movement feels uncertain, it is important to remember that labor organizing has always occurred - long before unions existed as formal institutions, without the support of labor-friendly politicians, and in the face of truly violent repression from bosses.

"While union membership is at an all-time low, public approval of unions is at an all-time high."

Timeline



"This chart illustrates the relationship between the percentage of Americans who belong to unions and national income going to the top 1% of Americans. As union density declines, income



(CIO) forms within AFL.

Timeline

| 1970 | Occupational Safety and Health Act is passed. | 2007 | Start of the Great Recession. |
|------|---|------|--|
| 1079 | Coalition of Black Trade Unionists is | 2018 | Amazon reaches \$1 trillion market cap. |
| 1972 | founded. | 2020 | Global COVID-19 pandemic begins. |
| 1973 | Labor Council for Latin American Advancement is founded. | 2020 | Chris Smalls is fired from Amazon's JFK8 Fulfillment Center in Staten Island NY. |
| 1974 | Coalition of Labor Union Women is founded. | 2022 | Amazon Labor Union becomes first group to unionize an Amazon |
| 1981 | President Ronald Reagan fires more than 11,000 air traffic controllers. | 0000 | warehouse in the U.S. Amazon surpasses FedEx and UPS to |
| 1994 | Amazon is founded by Jeff Bezos. | 2023 | become #1 delivery company in the U.S. |
| 1997 | Amazon builds first warehouse in Seattle, Washington. | | |



Journey of an Amazon Package

Amazon has developed an extremely complex delivery, distribution, and logistics system that is designed to maximize speed and efficiency.

Amazon's infrastructure is held together by the hyper-exploitation, mistreatment, and dehumanization of the workers who operate it. Amazon breaks down work through the creation of several job tasks that are repetitive and done at a back-breaking pace. Workers are expected to meet almost impossible production targets, feel pressured to skip bathroom breaks, and are overworked to the point that worker injuries are nearly double the industry standard in the U.S. Every worker is surveilled, every product and package tracked based on the last worker who scanned it in real-time. Warehouse work is impossible to completely automate because it requires human skills like problem-solving, troubleshooting, and the ability to carry various sizes of boxes and packages. Amazon's solution has been to merge technology with human labor, essentially turning workers into industrial robots.

¹⁰ Amazon is currently being sued by the Federal Trade Commission for allegedly maintaining illegal monopoly power via lowering prices, degrading quality for shoppers, overcharging sellers, stifling innovation, and preventing rivals from fairly competing. Amazon's far-reaching schemes impact hundreds of billions of dollars in retail sales every year, touch hundreds of thousands of products sold by businesses big and small and affect over a hundred million shoppers. It's a bad deal for everyone, except Amazon executives.

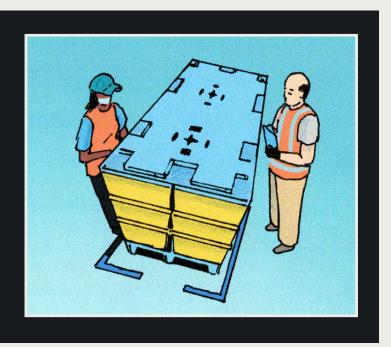
With all this in mind, let's take a look at the journey of an Amazon package and the many workers who make the delivery process possible. For a comprehensive list of Amazon-specific terms and acronyms, check out the glossary in our reference materials."

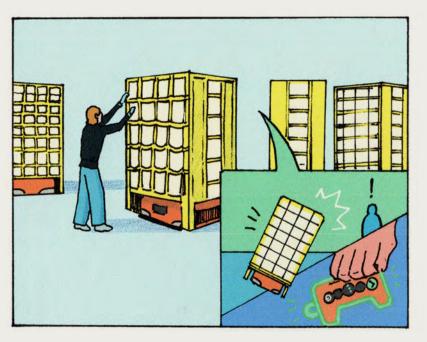
- 1. Amazon and independent sellers list products on Amazon's website. 10
- 2. A customer places an order online.* *On an average day, Amazon customers place an estimated 11.95 million orders online.
- 3. Amazon workers "pick and pack" customer orders at a Fulfillment Center warehouse.

UNION takes place at the massive JFK8 Fulfillment Center in Staten Island, New York. Let's take a deep dive into what actually happens inside an Amazon warehouse:"

INBOUND

This is where products from manufacturers arrive at the warehouse where they will be prepared for shipment. The inbound team unloads the product and transfers it to a tote - a yellow crate used for sorting and storage. At the inbound station totes are typically 2'x1'.





STOW STATION

*NOTE: these robots fall down... a lot. So much so that workers need to wear intelligent tech vests to "safely" interact with the robots/pick up fallen product - these vests signal to a robot not to hit the employee

PICK STATION

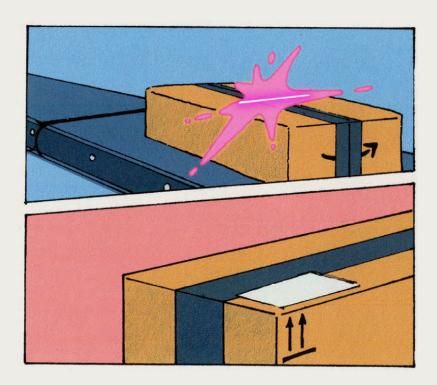
Here pickers follow a shining light directing them to pick an order from the pod, check it for damages and place it into a smaller tote. Once tote is full or at weight limit the picker pushes it onto a conveyor belt to be sent to the next station.





PACKING STATION

Here packers scan a barcode to register the content of tote in the system, which then selects the best packaging for the items (box or bag, and correct size). The employee grabs packaging selected and builds it with tape. The box is sealed by machines that dispense a prescribed amount of tape. The packer then adds a barcode to the box with information needed to create a shipping label.

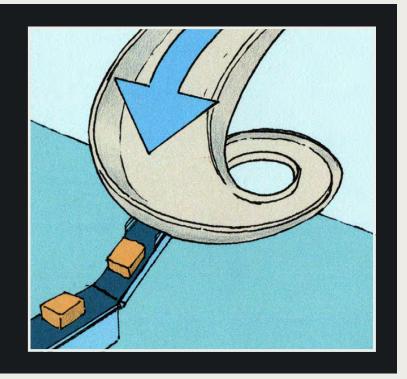


SLAM (SCAN, LABEL, APPLY, MANIFEST)

First the machine scans the barcode and passes the package to a scale which weighs the package to check it's the correct weight. Next, a robotic arm attaches the label on the box.

SHIPPING SORTER

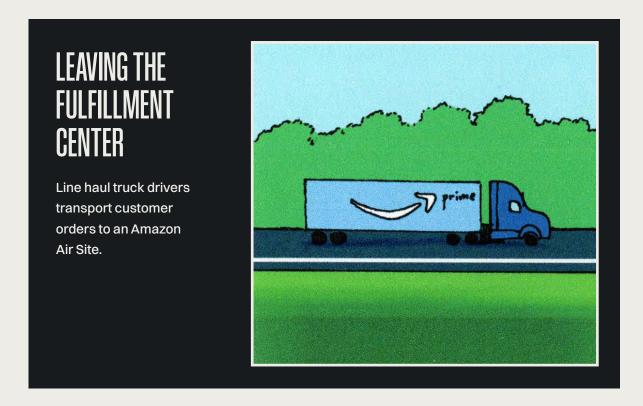
Scans the label and sends the package down a designated chute based on its final destination that leads to a shipping trailer.

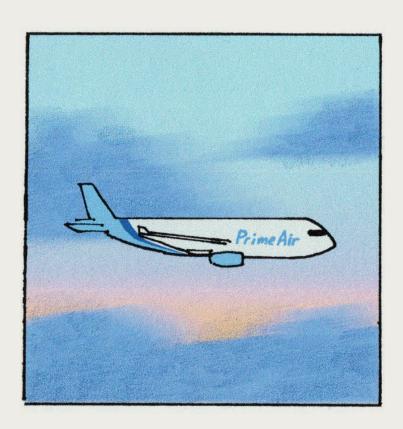


OUTBOUND STATION

Trucks pull up to a line of bays, workers fill the trucks with packages from floor to ceiling.



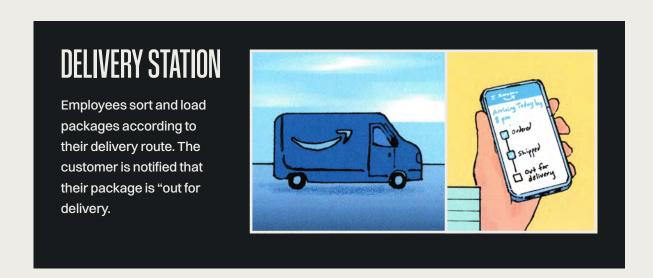




AMAZON AIR

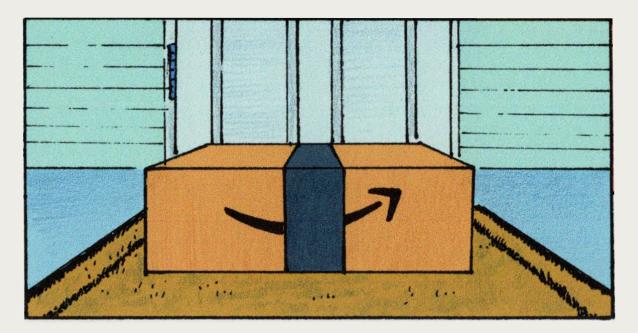
Amazon Air employees load packages onto an aircraft. Once landed, the packages are transferred to a sortation center.





DELIVERY

An Amazon driver delivers packages to a customer's front door.



 $Footnote: An Amazon \ driver \ refers \ to \ either \ a \ driver \ in \ an \ Amazon \ van \ or \ a \ "gig" \ driver \ in \ their \ own \ car \ who \ delivers \ the \ package.$ $In both \ cases, A mazon \ tries \ to \ say \ those \ folks \ aren't \ employees \ but \ A mazon \ controls \ everything \ about \ their \ work.$

<u>Suggested Activity:</u> Exploring Production, Shipment, and Delivery of Goods in relation to Consumer Choices

ACTIVITY

Consider inviting participants and members of your community to explore the entire process of production and consumption at another company of their choosing. This could include smaller, local businesses and empower people, as consumers, to make more informed buying decisions. The goal of this activity is to help raise participants' awareness around how their choices as consumers impact larger social and economic structures.

Suggested Discussion Prompts

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit: https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/

1. CONVERSATION STARTERS

These prompts may be useful as a warm-up to get the discussion flowing:

- In one word, how do you feel after seeing the film UNION?
- What is one thing you learned from this film that you did not know prior to watching?
- If you could ask anyone in the film one question, what would you ask, to who, and why?
- Name one thing that you found surprising or unexpected while watching.
- Describe a moment or scene that you found particularly compelling or that stood out to you. What made this stand out to you?
- Describe a moment or scene that you found challenging, confusing or where you weren't sure how to feel. Why this moment or scene?

2. CONSIDERING THE FILM

These questions address specific moments and themes in the film:

- Do you relate to any of the people in the film? If so, to whom and why?
- Why do you think the ALU was successful in winning their election?
- Why do you think Amazon had never been unionized before the ALU's win?
- What surprised you most about the process of unionization?
- With so many challenges in their way, why do you think the ALU organizers were so committed to unionizing their warehouse? How and why did they sustain their efforts and keep going for an entire year?
- Why do you think Amazon is so opposed to having a union in the workplace?
- The ALU is a diverse group made up of a variety of ethnicities, gender expressions, and class backgrounds. Difference in class background was most clearly seen with salts (those who started working at Amazon with the specific intent to organize for a union) vs. those in the group who had been working at Amazon for several years. What are some moments in which this diversity felt like a strength? And what are some moments in which this felt like a challenge?
- What was the role of "family" in this film?
- How did community step up (particularly other union members) to support people with differing family structures? What more could've been done to provide additional support?
- What did this film make you feel about the power of workplace organizing? Do you feel more optimistic or pessimistic, and why?

3. RELATING THE FILM TO YOUR COMMUNITY

These questions and prompts offer the audience a chance to relate the film to their own experiences:

- How does Amazon impact your community, can we list all the ways together?
- Prompt the audience to raise their hand if
 - 1) they are currently in a union
 - 2) they've been in a union at some point in their lives
 - 3) they have never been in a union.
- Have you ever been part of a community or group that felt similar to the interpersonal dynamics of the ALU? What felt similar?
- What would an ideal workplace look like? What do you need to feel safe and supported at work?
- What is your relationship like with your co-workers?
- Do you know your rights in the workplace?
- Have you ever encountered a situation in the workplace that made you feel uncomfortable? What about it gave you pause?
- Have you ever spoken to a coworker about your wage or other job conditions? Why or why not?
- After seeing this film, how do you feel about your workplace?



Ways To Take Action

Below we've compiled a list of suggested steps you can take to support Amazon worker organizing and the labor movement in general. For more information and up-to-date resources for each action item, as well as a full glossary of terms, see our reference materials.

HOW TO SUPPORT AMAZON WORKERS

- Share the film: Host a screening and discussion of UNION in your community.
- Follow Amazon organizing groups on social media to stay informed on calls-to-action
- **Donate to solidarity funds**
- Show up when Amazon workers' ask for public support: Attend rallies, stand on picket lines, and if you are a member of a union or other organization, encourage your group to stand in solidarity.
- Get a job at an Amazon warehouse and support organizing from the inside.
- Use your purchasing power: Limit your e-commerce shopping, limit your use of gig-based apps, shop at small, local businesses in your community
- Call or email your local representatives

HOW TO SUPPORT THE LABOR MOVEMENT

- **Unionize your workplace!**
- Join and/or donate to groups which directly support labor organizing
- Get a job in a union or as a labor organizer
- If you are in a union, get more involved
- Support strikes and other labor actions
- Coordinate a group to support local union efforts (strikes, petitions, etc)
- **Buy from unionized shops**

The Film Team



STEPHEN MAING

(Director, Cinematographer, Editor, Producer)



BRETT STORY

(Director, Producer)



SAMANTHA CURLEY

(Producer (p.g.a)



MARS VERRONE

(Producer (p.g.a)



MARTIN DICICCO

(Cinematographer, Producer)



MALIKA Zouhali-Worrall

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BLAIR MCCLENDON

(Editor)



ROBERT AIKI AUBREY LOWE

(Composer)

UNION







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