



David vs

VICTORIES BRING

Union membership is on the rise after decades of attacks on worker rights and power that sent organized labor's numbers tumbling to record lows. With workers' grievances at companies like Amazon and Starbucks often longer than the number of employees who work there, the union movement resurgence was inevitable.

Sparked by rising inequality, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic downturn that followed, employees seeking better working conditions and higher pay have realized the best way to achieve their goals is with a union.

In 2020, only 10.8% of the U.S. workforce belonged to unions according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics — down from a peak of 34.8% in 1954. So far this year, petitions for union elections are on pace to reach a decades-long high.

If workers organizing at Amazon, Starbucks, Apple, Google, and other companies and businesses have their way, the numbers will continue to climb. In less than one year, between Oct. 2021 and March 2022, union representation petitions filed at the National Labor Relations Board increased 57% from that same period a year prior.

The road to combat union busting and win a good contract, however, is not easy. Management wants nothing more than to stop unionization attempts in their tracks for fear of losing their unilateral power over their workers' salaries and benefits they know will be part of contract negotiations.

Workers across the country are riding the wave of unionization, though, and doing whatever it takes to be successful.

Just look at Chris Smalls and his efforts to win union power with his coworkers at a Staten Island Amazon warehouse. In 2020, he was fired for organizing against unsafe working conditions that threatened to lead to a COVID-19 outbreak at the facility where he worked. Amazon, known for its massive profits and exploitation of employees, came down hard on Smalls and his coworkers for simply talking to each other about improving their jobs through building union power. Published reports show Amazon spending millions

GOLIATH

ORGANIZING UNION MEMBERSHIP TO NEW HIGHS

By Marci Rosenblum, Communications Director

of dollars and breaking labor law to prevent workers from winning.

It didn't work. On April 1, the NLRB counted 55% of ballots cast at the Amazon warehouse were for the union. Chris Smalls is now president of the Amazon Labor Union (ALU). He went from packing boxes to unpacking all the injustices at the country's second largest employer.

"It's all about worker empowerment and grassroots mobilization," said **Local 1180 Private Sector Staff Representative Christopher Thomas** who works with 1180's 15 nonprofits. Local 1180 first began representing nonprofit workers in the early 1990s with Planned Parenthood at a time no other union wanted to represent them. Now, the number of groups turning to CWA has dramatically increased thanks in part to the tremendous success of both organizing and contract settlements.

Thomas points to Local 1180's most recent effort with National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) as an example of how David stopped Goliath.

Despite a year-long attempt to negotiate a fair contract, NDWA workers ran into repeated roadblocks by management, which was notified of workers' desire to form a union at the end of June 2020. It wasn't until Sept. 30, 2020, however, that management voluntarily recognized the unit. Six months later, workers began bargaining but management stalled at every turn with no transparency.

NDWA was unrealistic in negotiations, failing to adequately address salary inequities. On Oct. 20, 2021, Local 1180 presented a full economic proposal with innovative ideas, and a clear, just, and equitable compensation plan to take effect Jan. 1, 2022.

As NDWA has grown, their wage structure did not reflect change within the organization. For example, some employees were assigned managerial titles, yet did not supervise any employees; there was no clear role in wage placement with seniority or locality not being taken into consideration; and job responsibilities were not a factor in the wage configuration.

When NDWA staffers reached peak frustration, 97% of the membership voted on June 15 to request that the CWA Executive Board authorize a strike if needed.

Local 1180 issued a press release detailing management's wrongdoings. That press release made it all the way to the desk of U.S. Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh whose office reached out to CWA National President Chris Shelton asking how the Labor Department could assist.

The next day, NDWA management sat down with staffers and Local 1180 to negotiate a contract in good faith. NDWA staffers now have a ratified contract in place.

"All it takes is the right kind of pressure for management to realize that unions are not going away," Thomas said. "The resurgence we're seeing of workers wanting to unionize is not short term."

Local 1180 cannot talk about David taking down Goliath without mentioning the overwhelming success of organizing National Audubon Society workers. When 250 workers across 11 regions and headquarters at Audubon voted overwhelmingly in favor of forming a union, management was far from pleased. In fact, they repeatedly said they respected their workers while simultaneously spending massive resources on union busting law firms and resisting the Audubon for All union at every turn.

"Never underestimate the power of the working people," Middleton said. "Success might not come overnight, but it comes. Workers everywhere, but particularly in non-profits, are showing their strength and forcing management to align their labor practices with the current times."

When news first broke in March 2021 that Audubon workers were trying to organize, the movement had been ongoing for close to a year. Two brutal rounds of layoffs with no notice — one on Earth Day 2020 — pushed workers over the edge during what was already a stressful pandemic time.

"Workers realized that their salaries, their benefits, and their lack of job security put them in a precarious situation," Middleton said. "Coming to work every day in a culture of retaliation, fear, and antagonism, particularly toward women and people of color, was more than workers were willing to put up with."

When management heard about the unionization efforts, staffers repeatedly asked Audubon to commit to neutrality, a request that was denied.

Despite all management efforts to kill workers efforts to have a voice. It didn't work. (see full story on page 16).

Nonprofits are not the only private sector workers having their David v. Goliath moment. When workers at a Starbucks cafe in Buffalo, New York, voted at the end of last year to unionize, many wrote this off as a one and done. Those naysayers were wrong. Employees at more than 200 Starbucks cafes have since voted to unionize with more on the way.

Organizing at Starbucks has been moving faster than the lines at many local Starbucks drive throughs. That first historic success was what so many others needed to finally join the movement, knowing that a union would mean positive change and improve their lives.

Yet, companies like Amazon spend millions of dollars on union busting, often pulling workers into mandatory, captive audience meetings with high-priced law firms spewing anti-union propaganda. That leaves organizers having to use extreme creativity to reach their co-workers. As part of Smalls' efforts to reach the 8,000-plus Staten Island facility workers, he planned bonfires and offered free food and marijuana to bond with those he was trying to organize.

The COVID-19 pandemic has played a large part in the unionizing explosion. It was the catalyst for workers realizing there was more to life than just living to work. As an increasing number of American workers found themselves now able to do their jobs from home, the face of the workplace changed.

According to coworker.org that assists workers in organizing efforts, there was a "tidal wave of activism during the first months of the pandemic" with more hits to their website in a three-month period than all other months combined.

Also boosting the push to form a union is the current political environment that has its most pro-union president in history. In fact, one of Biden's first actions as president was to fire the former NLRB general counsel and appoint former CWA attorney Jennifer Abruzzo to the position. He is also a vocal supporter of the PRO Act that aims to make the unionization process easier for workers.

And of course, success begets success.

"Intimidation by management can be brutal. Workers are banding together to garner more strength," Middleton said. "While CEO and executive compensation packages skyrocket, the working, middle-class continues to struggle, often suffering from layoffs, unemployment, and stagnant wages. There is now a realization that forming a union does bring about positive change." ■

