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The Amazon logo is seen Nov. 25, 2020, in Staten Island, New York. (CNS/Reuters/Brendan McDermid)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Derrick Palmer and Christian Smalls, the two workers who succeeded in organizing a union at an Amazon warehouse in Staten Island, not only shook up Amazon with their surprise victory. They shook up the labor movement too.

"Unlike traditional unions, the Amazon Labor Union relied almost entirely on current and former workers rather than professional organizers in its campaign at a Staten Island warehouse," wrote Noam Scheiber, the New York Times' labor correspondent. "For financing, it turned to GoFundMe appeals rather than union coffers built from the dues of existing members. It spread the word in a break room and at low-key barbecues outside the warehouse."

Scheiber posed the provocative question: "Does the labor movement need to get more *dis*organized?"

Yes and no. As Scheiber went on to note, even this homegrown organizing effort on Staten Island received some help from established unions. Pro bono legal assistance, office space and a messaging platform were all given to the upstart union. And, if Amazon contests the result, the fight to organize could go on for a long time. Staying power is hard to come by without resources from outside the discrete workforce at a particular plant.

"Every successful organizing campaign needs to be owned and driven by the workers themselves," Adrienne Alexander, president of the Catholic Labor Network, told NCR in an email. "And it's been really exciting in this instance to see such a grassroots effort be successful against such a large, notoriously anti-union corporation. The efforts can potentially be amplified by the experience and resources that a national union can provide — and by the bonds of solidarity that such a larger connection brings. All of those things are especially important as the workers take the next, difficult step of securing a first contract."

Consider the tactics Amazon employs to defeat efforts to form a union. The company played hardball. Smalls was fired. Mandatory meetings for staff warned against the supposed dangers of joining a union, suggesting their wages could be cut. Managers repeated the classic anti-union line about not wanting a "third party," the union, to come between the company and its employees.

When the organizing effort is led from inside, the organizers can attest to the injustice of firing those trying to form a union like Smalls. They can speak up at the meetings and challenge the company's propaganda. And they can say, "What third party? I work here," when the corporation pretends a union is anything but the workers coming together.

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Having a workers' committee leading the effort results in other benefits as well. Unlike organizers who are flown in to lead a campaign, the grassroots organizers will know people in the community, from pastors to local reporters to police officers to public officials. They can enlist their help in defeating the lies the corporations spread and raise the stakes should the company play hardball. No company wants an ordained minister going on local television to denounce the kind of hardball tactics seen from Amazon.

Catholics link our commitment to solidarity with our commitment to subsidiarity. In fact, as Catholic social doctrine expert Stephen Schneck has explained, subsidiarity is the way we organize solidarity. The application here is obvious: It is the role of the national unions to help the local workers organize, not to try and do the organizing for them. So much of the discussion about subsidiarity focuses on what is the appropriate level of society for a particular decision or action, but we sometimes forget what the word means: *Subsidium*, the root of subsidiarity, is Latin for "help." The binary framing of the Times' piece — organized labor or *dis*organized labor — misses this point.

It would be a great thing for our society, for the fight against income inequality and for the dignity of work and of workers, if the effort to organize workers at Amazon expands throughout that corporation. No company has shown itself to be more hegemonic in its business practices, including towards workers, than Amazon.

But labor ferment extends beyond Amazon, and the Catholic Church needs to step up and lead by example. As recently reported here at NCR by my colleague Melissa Cedillo, workers at an upstate New York nursing home owned by Ascension Living have been without a contract since the first of the year, and held a one-day strike in early March to ask for higher wages.

Ascension Living is a part of Ascension, the St. Louis-based health care conglomerate that has also specialized in capitalist excess over the years. Back in 2018 I expressed my horror at the fact the company paid its CEO at the time, Anthony Tersigni, $13 million in 2015, and $17.6 million the year before. He resigned months later.

It is time for the Vatican to consider amending canon law so that all Catholic organizations live by an anti-income inequality ratio, that the highest paid employee at a Catholic hospital or university or other agency make no more than 10 times, or 20 times, the lowest paid employee.

The economy has been profoundly affected by the pandemic and workers are in a strong place. The latest jobs' report indicated the job market is exceedingly tight, giving workers more leverage in negotiations with employers. Let 1,000 union organizing campaigns bloom in such fertile soil! The added benefit of strengthening our democracy by empowering citizens to make common cause is almost as important as the higher wages and better working conditions a union brings.

Derrick Palmer and Christian Smalls drove a big nail into the coffin of neoliberalism. Here's hoping the burial won't be far behind.