



ALU

What's Old is New Again: Some Initial Thoughts on the Amazon Workers Victory

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In the past twenty years, I have been told time and again about how it is nearly impossible to organize Amazon, Starbucks, Wal-Mart and so many other leading workplaces until we get the Pro-Act, card-check (various government laws to make unionization easier to attain.)¹. This has come from some of our leading historians and sociologists and union officials. You live in the past, they responded. You don't understand, they assured me. We need to elect Democrats in order to move forward.

In the past twenty years, I've been lectured to, time and again, that the history of the 1930s is not very relevant to the present. Fordism is gone, they said. You have a romantic view of the world, they said. The reason the labor movement needs to be embedded in the Democratic Party is because things aren't like the 1930s.

Amazon workers victory is a breakthrough in that respect. And when I read that the manual being used by the Amazon workers in New York was William Z. Foster's, [The](#)

Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry the 1936 “old school” manual that served up the distillation of past struggles to the Left-wing organizers of the 1930s about 1) conquering fear 2) using community resources 3) effecting a left-wing genre of SALT-ing and rank-and-file democracy 4) figuring out class ways to unite a diverse base of working class lives, I was not surprised.

And when I found the constitution of the new Amazon Labor Union mandated that the executive officers would not make more than the average wage of the workers, I was not surprised.

What’s old is new again.

There is no way to reinvent the 1930s insurgency. Thank heavens!! That insurgency was fraught from the beginning, with models of Congress of Industrial Organization governance that derived from the United Mine Workers of America’s top down structures. These were learned from a generation of capitalist influence in the mining industry. The CIO was managed from on-high by men who were autocrats at heart. That catered to an alliance with a capitalist party that continued even when it was outright destructive.

Contra the leading suppositions about how the 1930s “made a New Deal,” that was the same in Chicago or Toledo or St. Louis, there was not one national campaign in the 1930s, but many different ones, with streams that led to great possibilities, and streams that led to a dead-end, top-down labor movement allied with the state’s foreign policy and committed to the growth of capitalism.

Those are my initial thoughts. Historians never predict, but we can hope we don’t have the repeat of the 1930s insurgency, in which the leadership of the old guard AFL & CIO used red-baiting and other nefarious methods to staunch the best models of unionism. Struggle-based unionism needs to have a chance, and only with this bottom-up organizing will it have a chance to prove itself.

Over the weekend, I heard a resounding chorus of pundits saying there is no historic precedent for this Amazon workers victory. When you couple the constitutional provision for democratic union model with the manner of organizing, there are untold number of historic precedents, but also causes for concern: the break-through strike/immigrant organizing of Passaic, New Jersey in 1926, the early 1930s wave of auto industry organizing, from Briggs to Toledo-Lite, the community-based organizing in Minneapolis Teamsters that broke through the Citizens Alliance,

the Black women nutpickers and ragpickers of St. Louis. What happened to those? The labor movement was as implicated in their demise as was capital's repression.

If today's new style of organizing can get a platform, they can learn from the failures of the 1930s as well as their own hearts and heads.

1. This is not an argument against these proposed laws, which would set up obstacles to union-avoidance strategies that have become the mainstay of corporations such as Amazon. But it useful to remember that resources devoted to electing moderate Democrats have not resulted in these laws, and that it was the workers' uprisings of the 1930s that resulted in the Wagner Act.

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