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Union

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Union

Abstract

This is a film review of *Union* (2024), directed by Stephen Maing and Brett Story.

Keywords

Labor organizing, worker rights, wealth inequality

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Author Notes

John Lyden is the Department Chair and Blizek Professor of Religious Studies at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservativism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



Union (2023), dir. Stephen Maing and Brett Story

This documentary covers the year-long struggle to establish a union at the JFK8 Amazon distribution facility, from 2021 to 2022, by focusing on the lives and interactions of those who were working to achieve this. As such, we get a portrait of a grass roots movement from the inside, complete with all the struggles among the organizers as well as with Amazon.

Amazon has always fought unionization at all its facilities, and even raised worker pay to \$15/hour in 2018 to try to defuse such efforts—although along with this, they cut monthly bonuses and stock awards. In addition, brutal work conditions still prevail with shifts of 10-12 hours with few breaks, high required productivity levels, and poor health conditions on the job. For all these reasons, Chris Smalls led efforts to create a union at JFK8, even after he was fired by Amazon, seeking better working conditions and a \$30 hourly rate. This film chronicles the small group of people who worked with Smalls towards that goal.

The first hurdle was to get the right to hold a vote to unionize, which required signatures from at least 30% of the employees. Camped out at a tent in the parking lot 24/7, sometimes battling winds and freezing weather, they gave out free food (and later, pot) as an enticement to converse about the value of the union, and eventually hit the required 30th percentile—only to have Amazon challenge the signatures, as by that time many of those who signed no longer worked there. Amazon facilities have massive turnover as workers are routinely let go after peak periods, so the organizers had to start again. They worried about the risks, especially to Chris as a Black man, were he to be arrested. When he and Jason (a current Amazon employee) are manhandled and arrested by police, the event shakes up all of them, as they debate whether it is worth it. We get to see the group at their most vulnerable as they bicker about tactics, with at least one person insisting that they need a national union's support—although they seem unable to acquire any such endorsement from a national union. Chris continues to insist they have to do this themselves, causing some to leave the movement.

Meanwhile, Amazon had hired union busters to run “training” sessions required of workers at which they tell them that the union dues will be exorbitant and they will lose all control of pay and benefit negotiations. Surreptitiously taken videos from these sessions show the coercive tactics of the highly paid union busters, as well as the efforts of the union supporters to argue against them; after one session seems to convince some workers to support the union, Amazon immediately cancels the sessions, as they clearly have found them counter-productive to their own goals. These little moments give the organizers hope as they head to the vote. “You are not a robot, you are not disposable,” become their slogans, and all their efforts finally prove effective when a majority votes to unionize. The viewer gets to share in that historic success, as we see the joyous reactions—the Sundance audience actually broke into applause, even though they certainly knew

it was coming—but contract negotiations have yet to occur, up to the present day, as Amazon appeals and stalls. The victory is not exactly pyrrhic, and it has inspired other efforts at unionization, but an uphill battle continues.

Overall, the film's value lies in its ability to humanize the struggle, as we get to see the personal lives of those who are committed to this goal. Unions are beginning to make a comeback, but only 10% of American workers belong to one, compared to the 33% of 70 years ago. This film adds to the efforts to show how wealth inequality has reached an extreme that must be challenged, and one cannot help but admire the devotion of those who do so.