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OPINION // OPEN FORUM

Amazon warehouse workers unionized. It's time tech workers do the same

Theodore Kim
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Workers at the Amazon distribution center on Staten Island, N.Y., celebrate after voting to unionize on Friday. The unionization is the first successful U.S. organizing effort in the retail giant's history. Eduardo Munoz Alvarez/Associated Press



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Last week, workers at Amazon's Staten Island warehouse voted to [unionize](#). This is a spectacular win for organized labor, but poses the question: Will Amazon's tech workers follow suit? Until recently, this would be all but unimaginable because the word "union" directly assaults the self-image of Big Tech professionals. Unions are for coal miners, auto workers and warehouse pickers: Working-class people without four-year college degrees.

However, as Big Tech has struggled to diversify, its own patterns of exploitation and pay inequality have become increasingly difficult to ignore. Two weeks ago, a former Google employee filed a [class-action lawsuit](#) against the tech giant alleging a pattern of discrimination against its Black employees, including steering them toward lower-level roles, lower pay and scant opportunities for career advancement.

Industry-wide salary surveys reinforce these allegations. A 2020 [Computer World](#) analysis of Charthop data showed that Black and Latinx tech professionals respectively make a whopping 30.3% and 24.8% less than their white peers. The gap actually grew between 2019 and 2020 as the pandemic raged around the world. A 2018 analysis by the [New York City comptroller](#) taking both gender and race into account showed that Hispanic and Asian American and Pacific Islander women software developers in the city respectively made an astonishing 30% and 32% less than their white male peers.

This problem usually gets framed individually; women and people of color need to "lean in" and ask for higher salaries and promotions. However, this framing obscures the shaky assumption that as the diversity of Big Tech increases, its pay will remain static. This is pure speculation. We must confront the possibility that positions are highly paid not because the work has intrinsic value, but because it has historically been dominated by white and Asian American men (like me).

This suggests a grim alternative to the "lean in" narrative: These lesser-paid professionals of color are correctly gauging what organizations are willing to pay for this work if they are the ones doing it. They ask for the salaries that will not breach an unspoken social norm. Nobody is missing out on an ironclad price tag attached to the work.

This pattern of discriminatory pay stretches back to the birth of computing. Women programmed the first electronic computer, the ENIAC, without the help of high-level languages or floating-point arithmetic, and performed ballistic calculations at the raw binary level. This would be fiendishly difficult for modern software engineers. A Virginia Tech study showed that, rather than being recognized and well-compensated, [their jobs were considered secondary](#) to the work of designing the surrounding hardware: The work the men were doing. In direct contradiction, a [Illinois Institute of Technology](#) study showed that women hardware operators in the United Kingdom during the same era were paid less for supposedly "monotonous" and "routine" machine work while the men doing the "clean and cerebral" calculations on that hardware were handsomely compensated. The pay follows the person, not the skill, and certainly not the merit.

These are the forms of systemic inequality that organized labor is designed to address. Collective bargaining agreements aim to restore a basic sense of fairness by standardizing equal wages for equal work, regardless of who is doing it. They are negotiated with a global view of everybody's salary: The exact perspective that individual workers lack. It breaks the fundamental information asymmetry of "and what starting salary were you looking for?"

Unionization in Big Tech is still an uphill battle because the popular imagination conjures a laundry list of stereotypes: unions steal from your paycheck, prevent your awful co-worker from getting fired and never lift a finger to address legitimate grievances. However, these same accusations, and worse, have been leveled at every company in Big Tech. Any large organization is susceptible to corruption. When they work effectively, unions can give employees a united voice against [military contracts](#) that violate a company's stated moral mission. They can push back when you're fired just for [discussing your salary](#) with co-workers. If you believe that the engineering and cleaning staff at your company should have access to the exact same health care, that's what a union is for.

At their best, they offer basic protections against irrational corporate logics. Even when corporations report [record profits](#), it does not translate into job security for workers. This held true even before the pandemic. In 2018, I was working at Pixar when "[Incredibles 2](#)" grossed [\\$183 million](#) on its opening weekend, putting it on track to [\\$1 billion](#) worldwide. Immediately after this, the biggest animated movie opening in history, the studio had layoffs. (My job survived.)

At Yale, where I now teach, computer science enrollment has exploded 400% over the last decade. Increasing the diversity of these ranks is an ongoing priority, but attracting more people of color to our field is disingenuous if we continue to sweep our problems of pay inequality under the rug. Without larger reforms, we are asking students to enter a professional landscape where their skills will be systematically devalued.

The image of the rugged, individualistic tech worker needs to be discarded because the reality is that unless you have an organization behind you as big as the one in front of you, you are going to lose. David fought Goliath, not an army of Goliaths. We need an army of Davids. Tech workers need to unionize.

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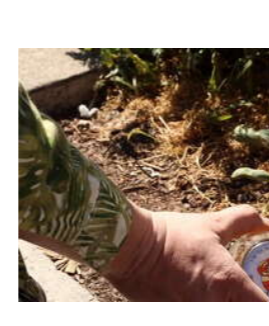
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