

'The only enemy is Amazon': Chris Smalls talks Bezos, unions during WA visit

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When Chris Smalls, the president of the first union at an Amazon warehouse in the U.S., visits classrooms, he says the 10-year-old students know who Jeff Bezos is—and often criticize him.

Smalls, who was in Seattle for a [labor](#) convention Tuesday, takes that as a sign the labor movement and unions overall are doing something right.

"I was a [worker](#) who got fired, that's all I was. And I'm still that person," Smalls said. "I'm doing something that's going to help, hopefully, the children I'm raising and future generations."

When the students talk to him about Bezos, Amazon's founder, Smalls said he knows "there's something right."

Smalls became one of the most recognized names in the effort to unionize Amazon's warehouse workforce in 2020 when he was fired for helping organize a strike at the JFK8 facility in the New York City borough of Staten Island. Smalls and other colleagues-turned-union leaders demanded the company provide more cleaning and [safety precautions](#) to protect workers amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2022, workers at JFK8 voted to form the first union at an Amazon warehouse in the country through an independent organization, Amazon Labor Union. That group is still working to secure its first contract with Amazon.

On Tuesday, Smalls traveled to Amazon's backyard to speak to labor leaders and union members at the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO convention in SeaTac. The labor council acts as a representative for hundreds of unions in the state. It works on political action and legislative advocacy as well as organizing campaigns.

In town for only one day, Smalls said he is not working directly with any employees from Amazon warehouses in Washington but has heard of efforts to organize in the same state that Amazon calls home.

Workers here are "in the mecca of billionaires, and Seattle's a tech city,

so for them to win here, would be historical," Smalls said in an interview.

With more than 65,000 employees, Amazon's largest corporate hub is in the Puget Sound region.

Outside of its corporate campus, Washington workplace regulators have kept an eye on conditions in Amazon's warehouses. The Washington Department of Labor and Industries has cited and fined Amazon four times for failing to provide a safe workplace for its warehouse employees. The workplace safety regulators have accused Amazon of setting an unsafe pace of work that puts employees at risk of injury as they quickly move package after package.

One of Amazon's warehouses in Washington—BFI3 in DuPont—has experienced the highest injury rates of any Amazon fulfillment center in the country: In 2019, it recorded 22 serious injuries for every 100 workers.

Amazon's warehouses across the country recorded 7 injuries per 100 workers in 2022, according to an analysis of injury data from the Strategic Organizing Center, a coalition of labor unions. Amazon's own analysis showed an injury rate of 6.7 injuries per 200,000 working hours that year.

Amazon has appealed all four citations. In April, when the Strategic Organizing Center released its report, Amazon told The Seattle Times it does not have fixed productivity quotas for workers and that employees are free to take breaks as needed. Managers are told that productivity or speed should not be pressed at the expense of safety or quality, Amazon said.

The company plans to invest \$550 million in safety initiatives in 2023,

adding to the \$1 billion it committed to safety from 2019 to 2022.

"The safety and health of our employees is, and always will be, our top priority and any claim otherwise is inaccurate," Amazon spokesperson Kelly Nantel told The Seattle Times in April. "We're proud of the progress made by our team and we'll continue working hard together to keep getting better every day."

Amazon and Washington state regulators are set to go to trial later this month to determine if Amazon has violated state law, and whether the company must then make changes to its operations.

Smalls, who said he has not been following the dispute, said the Amazon Labor Union understands the injuries Washington workers are facing because "we have them at home too."

"We see ambulances come every day, every other day. We're going to continue to try to amplify that—Amazon needs to be held accountable," Smalls said.

Smalls has faced criticism himself from within the organizing effort in Staten Island.

This month, a dissident group within the Amazon Labor Union filed a complaint in federal court seeking to force the union to hold a leadership election. In its complaint, the reform caucus argues that the union and its president illegally "refuse to hold officer elections which should have been scheduled no later than March 2023."

Smalls said in an interview Tuesday that the "only enemy is Amazon."

"All this petty infighting is ridiculous," he said. "Amazon wins if we're divided."

Amazon Labor Union has been locked in its own legal battle with the company since the vote to certify the union last year.

Amazon is still contesting the results of that election, and workers in Staten Island and elsewhere have accused the company of illegally interfering with campaigns and retaliating against workers who are involved.

The National Labor Relations Board ruled in January that Amazon had violated federal labor law in its efforts to resist unionization in New York. Amazon illegally threatened to withhold wage increases and improved benefits if workers elected a union, the ruling said.

Amazon told The Seattle Times earlier this year it doesn't think unionization best answer to concerns raised by workers, but recognizes that employees have the right to choose whether to join a union.

On Tuesday, Smalls praised labor regulations in British Columbia, where workers can now participate in a single-step certification process that allows employees to certify a union once a majority of them sign a card indicating support. In the United States, signing cards in support of the union is one of the first steps.

While Smalls felt the movement here was doing a good job educating the next generation, he pushed for union members to do more to hold leaders and politicians accountable. He criticized other [union](#) presidents for speaking to convention attendees only through recorded videos or deciding not to attend the convention at all. And he pushed back on President Joe Biden for intervening in discussions between rail companies and their workers, preventing a nationwide strike.

"We've got a problem here. We've got to hold unions accountable," Smalls told [union members](#) at the convention. "We have to get organized

and into new spaces. It's not going to be traditional anymore."

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