

CHALLENGING THE DOMINANCE OF BIG TECH:

FOR US, NOT AMAZON

in Arlington, VA



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*Bolded terms throughout the case study are defined in the Glossary and Actors section in the Appendix.



Introduction

In 2018, after 238 cities in the U.S. and Canada submitted competitive bids to become home to **Amazon's** highly-anticipated second headquarters, or "**HQ2**," Amazon announced that it had chosen not 1 site but 2: Queens, New York City and Arlington County, Virginia, near Washington, D.C.¹

Amazon paired its bidding process with a powerful public relations campaign about the range of economic benefits HQ2 would bring. Touting the "prosperity bomb" it had detonated in Seattle, it projected investments of some \$5 billion and 50,000 high-tech jobs.² But many residents of Virginia and New York feared that only a select class of people would truly benefit. They worried that HQ2 would lead to rising rents, displacing Black, brown, and low-income people. They foresaw increased surveillance, judging from Amazon's record of

partnerships with local police departments.

Community organizers in Arlington felt that Amazon had set up a "race to the bottom" through tax and subsidy deals that pitted cities against one another, each trying to outdo the next with gifts to one of the richest corporations in the world.³ Good Jobs First, a nonprofit that opposes corporate subsidies, called the HQ2 competition a "monument to high-tech arrogance and tax-break favoritism."⁴ In an effort to hold Amazon accountable, over 70 organizations representing community members, warehouse and service workers, and faith communities in more than 20 states put forth a set of demands. These included minimum standards for diversity in the workforce, living wages, and investments in transit, housing, and infrastructure.⁵

Shortly after Queens was named 1 of the 2 selected sites, the New York state government promised the company at least \$1.7 billion in economic incentives on top of millions more from New York City.⁶ The move triggered a backlash from progressive state and federal elected officials, community organizers, and unions. After months of intense resistance, Amazon withdrew its plans for New York City. Instead, it put all of its resources into the site in Northern Virginia.⁷ It began by partnering with a local developer, JBG Smith, known for building luxury condominiums that appeal to younger, affluent residents. The idea was to create a new neighborhood, called "**National Landing**," out of 3 adjacent districts in Arlington (Crystal City and Pentagon City) and Alexandria (Potomac Yard).⁸

Organizers in New York City were proud to have repelled Amazon but felt pained for their



allies in the DC area.⁹ While activists and community groups in northern Virginia also tried to fight the coming of HQ2, they had fewer resources and a less developed organizing infrastructure. Amazon's ability to wield its riches and political power to establish itself in Northern Virginia, even after a high-profile defeat in New York City, was a clear sign of the need for a coordinated, national resistance.¹⁰

The **For Us, Not Amazon (FUNA)** coalition formed in late 2018. It grew out of organizing by **PowerSwitch Action**, a national organization dedicated to building power and reshaping the economy and urban environment for workers and communities. PowerSwitch convened local groups that were concerned about their cities' bids for HQ2, helping them coordinate messages, demands, and protests. The FUNA coalition then united to stop HQ2 from coming to Northern Virginia—and, when that failed, acted to prevent Amazon from dominating the local economy. FUNA comprises a diverse coalition of consumers, workers, activists, and policymakers who believe that everyone should be able to benefit from economic growth, without having to sacrifice their community's well-being. FUNA is also a founding member of **Athena**, itself a coalition of local and national organizations focused on stopping Amazon's unconstrained growth and influence.

What is Economic Democracy at Demos?

This case study is part of Demos' new **Economic Democracy** project, which asks how poor and working-class people, especially in Black and brown communities, can exercise greater control over the economic institutions that shape their lives. This framework has 3 goals:

1. Break up and regulate new corporate power, including Amazon, Google, and Facebook.
2. Expand the meaning of public goods and ensure that services are equitably and publicly administered.
3. Strengthen "co-governance" strategies so that people and public agencies can collectively make decisions about the economy.

This case study follows the arrival of Amazon's HQ2 to Northern Virginia and the organizing that emerged in Black and brown communities to resist. It explains how the company worsened economic inequality by exploiting public subsidies, pushing out working-class households, using segregated hiring practices, and targeting Black and brown communities through surveillance and partnerships with law enforcement agencies. This study raises a fundamental question: How do you hold the transnational corporation in your backyard accountable—especially when local government and the media either *can't* or *won't*?

The For Us, Not Amazon coalition in Northern Virginia has, over the past 3 years, pushed back against one of the largest and most powerful corporations in the world. This study explores how FUNA has worked with national groups, namely Athena and PowerSwitch Action, to connect with similar efforts and build collective power on a larger scale.

Timeline

September 2017 - Amazon announces public competition for HQ2 site.
The announcement includes a wish list of a metropolitan area with more than 1 million people, a skilled workforce, local colleges and universities, transit options, and incentives from local governments in the form of tax credits and exemptions, relocation and workforce grants, utility incentives, and/or fee reductions.¹¹

October 2017 - Deadline for bids to host
the company's second headquarters.

January 2018 - After receiving 238 proposals from localities in 54
states, provinces, districts, and territories across North America, Amazon announces a shortlist of 20, including Washington D.C. and Northern Virginia.¹²

November 2018 - One week after announcing it will
have 2 HQ2s, Amazon selects NYC and Arlington. The For Us, Not Amazon coalition launches to stop HQ2 from moving forward in Arlington.

January 2019 - After 9 minutes of debate, the Virginia
state legislature approves a \$750 million subsidy package to be granted to Amazon over 15 years.

February 2019 - Amazon pulls out of its plan
for HQ2 in New York City, after backlash from activists.¹³ The company decides to focus HQ2 efforts in northern Virginia. Shortly after the announcement, the price of single-family houses in the area doubles.

March 2019 - Arlington County Board votes to approve a \$23
million incentives package to confirm HQ2's arrival. The vote was delayed 2 months as a result of community pressure.



June 2019 - Amazon hires its first employees
at HQ2, setting them up in a temporary office.

September 2019 - Reports emerge that Arlington
Police Department is considering a contract with
Ring to access user surveillance footage and data.

November 2019 - Technology rights nonprofit Fight for the
Future and other groups call on Congress to investigate Amazon's
surveillance products, including the Ring front-door monitor and
facial-recognition software.

January 2020 - Amazon breaks ground on
HQ2, starting with two 22-story towers on
the Metropolitan Park development site.

April 2020 - Some weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic, FUNA
and partners demand that Amazon forgo the incentives promised
by politicians and instead use those funds to address the increasing
public need, especially among communities of color and
poor people.¹⁴

September 2020 - Arlington County Police
Department says it is no longer pursuing a partnership
with Ring. Other area departments, including the
Alexandria and Prince William County police, still have
active MOUs with Ring.¹⁵

February 2021 - Amazon announces its design for the second
phase of HQ2, PenPlace, which includes a double-helix shaped
glass building called "The Helix." Construction is expected to
finish in 2025.¹⁶

August 2021 - Amazon surpasses
Walmart to become the world's
largest retailer outside of China.
Jeff Bezos is named the richest
person in the world.¹⁷



The Problem:

Amazon's uncontrolled growth and dominance in Arlington and Beyond

“There’s HO2, but now there’s also an Amazon Go convenience store in DC, and they’re building a grocery store in Northern Virginia. They have student ambassadors. And there’s probably not a day that goes by that I don’t see an Amazon truck driving somewhere. Everywhere you go, there’s Amazon.”

- Dr. Maha Hilal, Executive Director of Muslim Counterpublics Lab and a member of FUNA

From Bookseller to Behemoth: Amazon's Rapid Growth and Expansion

Most consumers know Amazon as a giant of retail and media. Yet, few are aware of the company’s full range of businesses, or their enormous scale and scope. Amazon’s goal has always been to become the ultimate gatekeeper and monopolize the very infrastructure of the global economy.¹⁸ It has turned that vision into control over the warehousing, logistics, cloud computing, community surveillance, and e-commerce industries. From its domination of e-commerce, Amazon became

a brick-and-mortar grocery seller by acquiring Whole Foods. It also controls vast swaths of the Internet through Amazon Web Services, and now owns an increasing share of the home security market through its Ring digital camera line.¹⁹ Amazon’s founder, Jeff Bezos, also owns the Washington Post, and has recently founded a space travel venture called Blue Origin.²⁰

Though its preferred origin story is of a rags-to-riches home-garage startup, its true origin is in the investment capital industry of the 1980s, where Jeff Bezos got his start. The profit-by-any-means principle of the finance industry—whether through abusive labor practices that disproportionately affect Black and brown workers, predatory pricing, or tax evasion—guide the company to this day.

Amazon's Dominance over Local and Regional Economies

Amazon’s unchecked growth on local and regional economies has been devastating. The company’s core business of logistics and warehousing is built on large distribution centers in underdeveloped areas with limited employment opportunities. Amazon’s warehouse business model relies on high levels of employee churn, extraordinary rates of workplace injuries, constant worker surveillance, and fines and firings for such transgressions as frequent bathroom breaks.

In many rural and exurban towns, Amazon gets away with its abuses by being the main or sole employer.²¹ But in the affluent urban centers where

Amazon has its headquarters, it exerts its monopoly market and hiring power in similar ways.²² For example, in Seattle, Amazon owns one-fifth of the city’s prime office real estate and has created a playground for its white-collar workers while driving up housing prices, displacing low-income residents, and hiring Black and brown workers for the most dangerous, insecure, and low-paying jobs.²³ Amazon’s self-reported employment data reveals that over half of Amazon’s warehouse and delivery workers nationwide—the most physically taxing and lowest-paid jobs in the company—are Black and brown, compared to less than 8 percent of their senior leadership.²⁴ There are prohibitions on raises and on rank-and-file warehouse and delivery workers being promoted to management, meaning that by the organization’s very design, the physical laborers—which is to say, Black and brown people—stay the physical laborers, ensuring that the economic and social classes of employees remain stratified by race.²⁵

Where warehouse workers across the country have demanded better conditions, the company has tried to quash organizing efforts, often using illegal tactics.²⁶ In 2021 alone, Amazon spent \$4.3 million on anti-union consultants, targeting high-profile organizing efforts in New York City and Bessemer, Alabama.²⁷ Amazon’s anti-union blitz in Bessemer was ultimately successful, even as it was found illegal by the National Labor Review Board, with workers describing harassment from management, surveillance fears, and retaliatory firings that chilled potential pro-union voters from freely exercising their right to organize.²⁸

Amazon used similar tactics in an attempt to thwart Amazon Labor Union's (ALU) organizing efforts in the **JFK8** warehouse on Staten Island, New York.²⁹ Amazon responded to the organizing push by firing the lead organizers, who were Black men, forcing workers to sit through anti-union meetings, and buying banners and posters, Instagram and Facebook ads, and even a website, all of which urged workers to vote "no."³⁰ Impressively, organizers succeeded anyway. A majority of the warehouse's employees voted to form the first union at the company in the United States, showcasing the power of Black worker-led organizing.³¹

Between operating warehouses and corporate offices for its parent company and deploying hundreds of low-wage independent contractors to make deliveries, Amazon has created de facto **company towns** across the U.S. Further, Amazon's outsized power in the marketplace has allowed it to pit municipalities against one another in subsidy bidding wars, promising job gains and increased regional commerce in exchange for tax breaks. These bidding wars have ensured that, no matter where Amazon chooses to go, its tax liability will be miniscule, even as it makes demands on local infrastructure—roads and power grids and public transportation—which depend on the tax revenue they themselves elude paying.

H2Q in Northern Virginia: Subsidies, Surveillance and Soaring Rent

Residents of Northern Virginia knew that the area was a likely pick for Amazon's HQ2. There was the proximity to federal agencies (the Pentagon and the Department of Defense, for example) and the large number of government contractors. Northern Virginia is also home to aerospace and military companies, technology and cybersecurity firms, and media outlets—many of which rely on Amazon Web Services (AWS) for their daily operations.³²

Government Subsidies Bolster Amazon

As Amazon was making a final decision about HQ2, the Arlington County Board and the Virginia state legislature did everything they could to lure the company, seeing the potential for billions of dollars in real estate and corporate development. In March 2019, the Board unanimously approved a \$23 million subsidy package, provided only that Amazon would occupy 6 million square feet of office space by 2035.³³

Yet even those who supported Amazon's entry into Northern Virginia, including County Board member Katie Cristol, expressed concern. Cristol voted to approve the incentives package but expressed disappointment

over "the missed opportunity" to support "working people" and "disrupt Northern Virginia's exploitative construction market for the better."³⁴ These county incentives were in addition to the \$750 million in state incentives approved by the Virginia General Assembly. The state package required only that a certain number of employees be hired at an average salary of \$150,000.

Amazon Threatens to Cause Gentrification and Displacement

Despite the enthusiasm of elected officials, many residents of Northern Virginia worried about the negative impact of Amazon's new headquarters. Arlington was already experiencing an affordable-housing crisis, sparked by a steady increase in its population over the previous decade.³⁵ With Amazon set to redevelop the area, residents anticipated an uptick in traffic, increased rents, and the loss of small businesses. Cofounder of La ColectiVA Danny Cendejas recalled that when he arranged meetings with locals, "The issue that surfaced was the threat of displacement. That came up through examples like discriminatory parking practices, but also increased threats from property managers."

Community members were particularly concerned that HQ2 would lead to the displacement of low-income, Black, and brown residents of Arlington County. At

a March 2019 meeting of about 70 people, hosted by Tenants and Workers United, residents complained of ever-rising rents. A report by the New Virginia Majority projected that the arrival of HQ2 could displace as many as 10,000 working class and Latinx residents of Arlington County.³⁶ According to Cayce Utley, the lead organizer at **Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) Northern Virginia**, “The main concern with HQ2 was about gentrification and displacement. This is a ridiculously expensive place to live, and for a lot of people who aren’t doing corporate or war jobs, it’s really a struggle to make rent.”

Their concerns proved to be right. Shortly after Amazon’s HQ2 announcement, the price of single-family houses in the

area doubled.³⁷ As a result of community pressure, the company pledged \$2 billion to create and preserve thousands of affordable housing units through a housing equity fund.³⁸ However, according to an analysis by the Washington Post, housing assistance has overwhelmingly flowed to renters with the highest incomes.³⁹ Only 6 percent of units funded to date have been set aside for the lowest-income residents in the D.C. area.⁴⁰

Increased Surveillance: Amazon’s Deal with Local Law Enforcement

Another threat posed by Amazon was increased surveillance of communities in Arlington. The corporation has long provided technology to **U.S. Immigration**

and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other law enforcement agencies. In Arlington, it planned a partnership with the **Arlington County Police Department (ACPD)**. In late 2019, an Amazon representative acknowledged that Amazon **Ring** was in negotiations to give the ACPD access to the location of every Ring camera in the county.⁴¹ Ring has been criticized for enabling warrantless surveillance and sharing data with law enforcement that could be used for racial profiling.⁴² With this in mind, more than 30 civil rights organizations, including RAICES, Color of Change, and Fight for the Future, have called on lawmakers to end local police partnerships with Ring.⁴³



“

There's this picture that the coalition kept taking—of people with a 'For Us, Not Amazon' banner, standing outside the building where the County Board meets. In the earliest pictures, you see a handful of folks holding the banner. Then, the next time, it's a small crowd holding the banner. In the last picture, it's entirely different people and a larger crowd holding the banner. It's like seeing our mobilization over time, that it does snowball. When people see that there is something to do about it, they'll do something about it.

- Cayce Utey, lead organizer at Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) Northern Virginia



The Solution:

Mobilizing to push back against corporate power

Building the For Us, Not Amazon (FUNA) Coalition

The For Us, Not Amazon (FUNA) coalition was formed in 2018, shortly after the county submitted a bid for HQ2 and Arlington County Board members waved away concerns at a community meeting.⁴⁴ Following the meeting, individual activists and several grassroots organizations held a community forum on HQ2, which ultimately led to FUNA's formation.

FUNA is primarily led by women of color and brings together African American, Latinx, and Arab, Asian, and African migrant communities. In its organizing, the coalition chose not to limit itself to a campaign against corporate subsidies. Instead, it built out a comprehensive campaign for corporate accountability, worker justice, affordable housing, migrant rights, and community safety.

At the main HQ2 site, the coalition has called for construction jobs that pay union wages and measures to preserve and generate affordable housing. It has demanded an end to Amazon's collaboration with ICE, and to policing and surveillance policies that criminalize communities of color. FUNA seeks to hold elected officials accountable as well. As organizer Danny Cendejas said, "We had to push forward with political education to raise awareness of Amazon's harms around housing, ICE, etc.—issues that were being ignored and overlooked by politicians."

Using Community Outreach and Education to Hold the County Board Accountable

From the beginning, local residents and activists condemned the lack of public consultation and debate that went into the county's creation of an incentives package. According to organizer Maha Hilal, "A lot of the benefits that Amazon is deriving from being in the area were done in closed-door meetings that you only find out about after the fact." Danny Cendejas agreed: "The County Board just wanted to have their status quo continued."

While the debate around the incentives package was occurring, organizations like **La ColectiVA**, a Latinx social justice nonprofit, and **Justice for Muslims Collective**, a group that challenges institutionalized Islamophobia, canvassed neighborhoods to mobilize people to turn up at the board

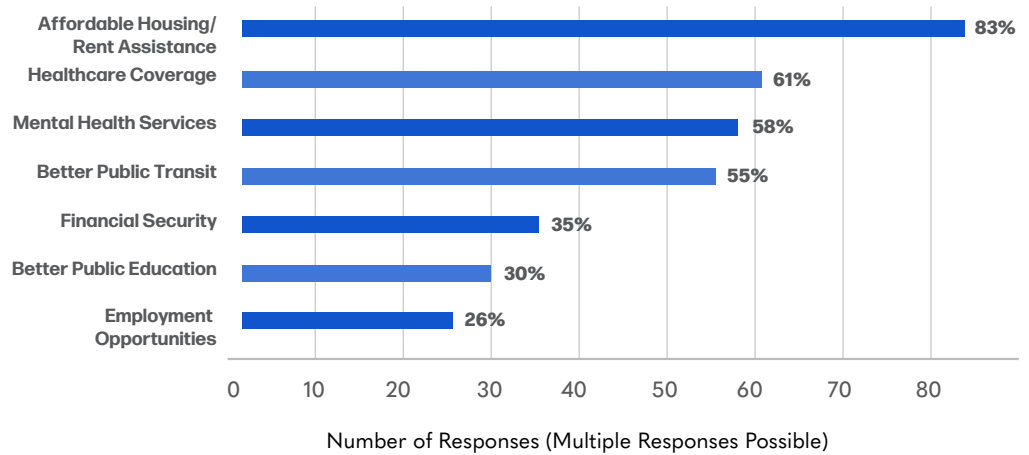


meetings, doing the community engagement that the Arlington County Board had declined to do.

The coalition also used art to help community members articulate a positive vision for the region instead of allowing Amazon to dictate their future. In addition, FUNA coalition members secured an unprecedented commitment that county meetings would include interpretation for Spanish speakers. The county agreed to publish information about the negotiation process on its HQ2 website with translations in Spanish, Amharic, and Mongolian.

Under pressure from FUNA, the County Board agreed to delay the vote on the incentives package until after 2 additional listening sessions with the community. At these sessions and during the subsequent vote, members of the coalition spoke out forcefully.⁴⁵ Even after the subsidies were approved, FUNA members informed residents about the county's opaque budgeting and decision-making processes, surveyed community members about their desires for community investment, and delivered more than 1,000 signatures petitioning Amazon to give up its subsidies.

What Does Your Community Need Most?



Results from 2019 FUNA Community Survey



Resisting Amazon's Surveillance Contract with Local Police

When word first got out, in September 2019, that the ACPD was considering a contract with Ring, FUNA led direct actions, street shutdowns, media outreach, and flyering to highlight the threat of racial profiling and surveillance in the community. FUNA also contacted County Board members and spoke at County Board meetings about their concerns. At one such meeting, the County Manager repeatedly referred to “handwritten notes” when FUNA members raised concerns about the Ring proposal. Afterward, FUNA obtained those notes through a public-information request and learned that they “included some talking points from Amazon.”

Despite FUNA's efforts, the ACPD met with Ring in December 2019 to move their negotiations forward. Then, in the middle of 2020, after nationwide uprisings in response to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, FUNA and its allies petitioned the county to end any negotiations between the ACPD and Ring.⁴⁶ In September 2020, ACPD announced that it was no longer “actively seeking” a partnership with Ring, choosing instead to focus on other departmental priorities.⁴⁷

“Through all of that—the meetings, pressures, direct action, doing the press work—we were able to get a response,” Cendejas said. “They were not considering the agreement anymore. But we're still trying to make sure it doesn't happen.” FUNA has since demanded that

the ACPD publicly pledge not to form a partnership with Ring at any point in the future, and has partnered with national groups to put additional pressure on the ACPD to stop partnering with ICE on deportations.⁴⁸

Connecting Northern Virginia to Organizers Around the World Through National and International Campaigns

FUNA has amplified its demands by connecting with large national movements. For example, FUNA has called for public entities to stop using and subsidizing Amazon's surveillance technologies, along with No Tech for ICE, a national campaign focused on tech's outsized role in criminal justice and immigration enforcement.⁴⁹

FUNA is also connected to a broad coalition of local and national organizations through the Athena coalition, which supports them through coordinating actions, connecting FUNA with other groups working on a range of issue areas, as well as by uplifting FUNA's messages and raising awareness about local campaigns. Through Athena, FUNA was able to learn about other similar fights against Amazon happening across the country and use those lessons to inform their organizing strategy. “Athena gave us an opportunity to listen to and hear about what challenges other groups are facing across the country, in regions that are being acutely impacted by Amazon,” said organizer Maha Hilal. “They're addressing a lot of the national issues, then deferring to us in terms of what local issues need to be addressed.”



At the international level, FUNA coordinates with the Make Amazon Pay campaign, a broad coalition of workers and activists with the shared goal of making Amazon fund its impact on the environment and our communities. This includes demands on Amazon to raise workers' pay in all warehouses, end union busting, commit to zero carbon emissions by 2030, stop partnering with police and immigration authorities, and pay taxes in full—with no more profit shifting or use of loopholes and tax havens.⁵⁰ On Black Friday of 2021, the Make Amazon Pay

campaign coordinated strikes and protests in 20 countries around the world and garnered public support from over 400 political leaders worldwide.⁵¹

Members of the FUNA coalition hope to take advantage of the tide that seems to be turning against abusive corporations. "We've tried to keep the focus really local, but being able to tap into national fights has been helpful in educating people that we're not alone in this. There's a whole national movement here," said Cayce Utley of SURJ NOVA.

Up Against Amazon Institute: Developing a Training program to share knowledge and connect with a larger network of local organizers

In March 2022, FUNA began the first iteration of its Up Against Amazon Institute, a 2-day training program. The training sessions ranged from understanding Amazon's effect on housing and workers' rights to the corrosive impact of Amazon's monopoly in Northern Virginia. All sessions are publicly available online.⁵²

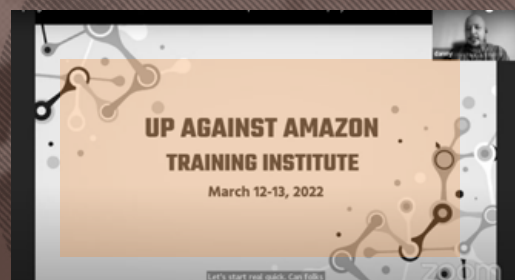
The idea behind the Institute was to address the myriad of ways Amazon harms local communities and map the connections between them. "At first

I felt sort of overwhelmed by the multitude of issues that Amazon presented," organizer Maha Hilal said. "We needed to get to the root of all of the problems Amazon is creating, understanding the connections between the multiple issues—whether it be housing surveillance, AWS, or something else."

FUNA formed bonds with many national and local organizations that sent speakers and circulated information to their networks. "I really do see the Amazon Institute as a major win and getting folks on board with that as a real opportunity, not just to spread this message, but also

to learn to build these skills and this awareness, and then be able to transfer that and take that out into their own work," Hilal said.

FUNA intends to host more Up Against Amazon Institute meetings in the future.





Q&A with Mariah Montgomery

Mariah Montgomery is the national campaigns director at PowerSwitch Action (formerly the Partnership for Working Families), where she works with a diverse range of groups to harness collective resources, challenge corporate power, and build the common good. In recent years, she has focused on confronting the big tech firms that undermine political and economic democracy, workers' rights, and racial justice in cities. She coordinates a table of local campaigns on Amazon and was a member of the initial coordinating committee of the Athena coalition. PowerSwitch is a founding member of the Athena coalition and a partner of FUNA.

How did you initially get connected to FUNA?

For Us, Not Amazon is a founding member of Athena, and the collaboration between PowerSwitch, FUNA, and other Athena members predates the Athena coalition itself. Back in 2017 and 2018, PowerSwitch Action was organizing with local coalitions to push back on Amazon's HQ2 search in many cities across the country.⁵³ We were convening regular calls, developing shared messaging and demands, and coordinating on-the-ground actions. Several Northern Virginia groups, including FUNA, were part of that formation. We were also part of larger conversations about Amazon's outsized power and abuse of workers and communities. Together we

created what is now Athena. Athena has provided different types of support to FUNA at different times—from communications and press, to research, to financial support. Before the pandemic, Athena convened organizations across the country in person to build relationships and share information.

How does Athena bring together separate fights—for example, the fights against HQ2 in New York and Northern Virginia? What organizing practices and tactics seem to be most helpful for folks on the ground in their local fights?

During the HQ2 fight and now, Athena has brought together local organizers to share

organizing and policy ideas. People share the messages and questions they are using to connect with community members, research questions they are considering, tactics, and so on. The most important thing—over and over again—is large numbers of organized people committed to an alternative and taking action. This is most effective, however, when there is also some way to leverage institutional power, including when members of elected government are aligned with the movement. And so, more than any specific practice an organizer can do, 2 key things are: 1) movement infrastructure and 2) capacity, including money, to organize for a long-haul campaign.

From your perspective, how can national coalitions like Athena support local coalitions like FUNA with their organizing strategies?

In taking on the U.S.'s first trillion-dollar company, the interplay between national and local is not just beneficial, it is critical. When dealing with a mega-corporation like Amazon, local organizing can be marginalized or unable to scale to a degree that it captures the attention of decision-makers or forces change. When there is also a national effort, the actions of several localities can add up, drive attention and spur change. National coalition efforts disconnected from local community organizing and issues would fail to achieve one of the central goals of Athena:

to reshape the balance of power between corporations and people. Very concretely, national coalitions can also add key types of capacity—like research, communications support, funding—generally and at key moments. By bringing together folks who are facing similar challenges, we can offer strategic and moral support to local organizers.

From another angle, how have these connections helped support your organizing strategy in the Athena coalition? What role do local groups play in making the Athena coalition stronger?

Strategically, local groups often have the best information on how people are being impacted

by the company and what kinds of responses—actions and narrative—are going to help us connect with more and more people and continue to strengthen our work. Athena's understanding of power-building centers base-building, and local groups are where that has and will happen. One of Athena's aims is to build movements through our coalition—and so, strengthening local organizations, organizing various constituencies, is not just a means to an end but also an end unto itself.



Opportunities + Lessons

The coalition continues to call on Amazon to pay its fair share of local taxes, forgo the subsidies (especially in light of public budget shortfalls and extraordinary corporate profits during the pandemic), and indefinitely refuse to partner with local police on surveillance. “We lost the thing we were fighting for in the beginning. But there's so many more fights to come, and the displacement fight is going to keep coming. All of these local fights are going to keep coming. We have to keep uplifting those stories and bring more people into a consciousness about this,” said Cayce Utley. The members of the For Us, Not Amazon coalition want Arlington County to grow in a way that enables all community members to thrive.⁵⁴

Here are some lessons in building economic democracy and challenging new forms of corporate power that have emerged from FUNA’s campaign against Amazon:

Make affirmative community demands. In the David-and-Goliath fight against Amazon, local activists in Northern Virginia knew that many residents, business associations, and politicians were against them. FUNA explained that it was not only about fighting Amazon, but rather about expanding affordable housing and investing in the health, education, and economic futures of Black and brown community members. Through petition gathering, canvassing, and town halls, they identified shared community values, coalesced around common goals, and affirmatively demanded that these values not be sidelined.

Coordinate local and national organizing toward a unified objective. One way to build power is by amassing local organizing efforts, on a national scale. In this way, members of For Us, Not Amazon in Northern Virginia have connected to organizers in California’s Inland Empire, the suburbs of Minneapolis, and New York City. By linking macro-level trends, movement organizers have cast a light on the common patterns by which Amazon erodes community well-being across the country, including its environmental, privacy, labor, and hiring abuses, manipulation of consumer markets, and tax evasion practices.

Adjust priorities, objectives, and tactics to achieve wins—while remaining true to the movement’s values. FUNA’s initial objective was to prevent Amazon from locating HQ2 in Northern Virginia. The coalition lost that battle, but quickly regrouped to attack Amazon’s grip on local legislators and prevent Arlington County Police from partnering with Ring—a winning fight. FUNA has also shifted from solely demanding that Amazon forgo its subsidies to demanding that Amazon pay its fair share through the global Make Amazon Pay campaign.⁵⁵

“What are the values that our communities hold, and how do we move them forward? We definitely want to build up a regional space so we are able to work together and look out for one another.”

- Danny Cendejas, La ColectiVA

Connect across issue areas and sectors. The national Athena coalition offers a potent model to address the harms created by Amazon. It brings together organizations with an array of concerns, including workers' rights, climate justice, and inclusive community development. Athena also targets the use of surveillance technology to expand racist data capitalism and harmful law enforcement systems. FUNA successfully staved off ACPD's contract with Ring by building upon existing momentum around racial justice and holding the ACPD accountable for their harmful treatment of communities of color. Additionally, by providing a space to share knowledge through the Up Against Amazon Institute, FUNA has forged connections with a variety of national and local organizations.

Support worker organizing across diverse locations and segments of Amazon. In 2018, following reports of severe overcrowding, freezing temperatures, and frequent abuse by guards in ICE detention

centers, more than 500 Amazon employees wrote a letter calling on the company to discontinue its work for ICE.⁵⁶ The employees formed "We Won't Build It," a network of employees and employee resource groups, to protest Amazon's involvement in family separation, detention, and deportation.⁵⁷ While the campaign had limited impact, this type of issue-based worker organizing presents the opportunity to appeal to and unify every class of worker at Amazon, from warehouse workers and delivery drivers, to software engineers, to service workers and janitors on the campuses of Amazon headquarters.

In Amazon warehouses, meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has fueled several prominent unionization efforts with interconnected demands. In April 2022, thousands of employees in Staten Island's JFK8 fulfillment center voted to join the Amazon Labor Union, an independent union founded by Black rank-and-file workers. Already the JFK8 win has had a reverberating effect on warehouse workers across the country.⁵⁸

Build upon investigations to break up Amazon and other big tech companies. Many people consider Amazon to be an unregulated monopoly, and the Biden administration, Congress, and the FTC have recently expressed grave concerns over corporate consolidation.

After Amazon moved to acquire movie and television giant MGM, the FTC launched an investigation into potential illegal competitive advantage. The FTC is also looking into Amazon's alleged monopoly hiring and purchasing power. Biden's appointment of FTC Chair Lina Khan, a longtime critic of Amazon, suggests the possibility of restructuring big tech corporations. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the Athena coalition has convened 48 civil rights and advocacy groups to call on the FTC to ban corporate facial surveillance technology, ban continuous corporate surveillance of public spaces, and protect the public from data abuse. In addition, several governmental and regulatory agencies are pushing back against Amazon with antitrust legislation.⁵⁹



Appendix



Basics on Arlington County, Virginia

- Arlington County has a population of 233,000.⁶⁰ The county has experienced a steady increase in its population over the past several decades, growing by 80,000 people since the 1980s.⁶¹
- 75 percent of the population is white, 10 percent is Black or African American, 11 percent Asian, and 16 percent Hispanic or Latinx.⁶²
- 23 percent of people are foreign-born, and one-third of the county's foreign-born population comes from El Salvador, Ethiopia, Bolivia, China, and India.⁶³ 30 percent of people speak a language other than English at home.⁶⁴
- The poverty rate is 7.6 percent, about 2 percentage points lower than the state of Virginia's.⁶⁵
- 30 percent of Arlington's households are rent-burdened, meaning that they spend 30 percent or more of their household income on housing.⁶⁶
- Just under half of the jobs in the county are considered professional and technical services and other services.⁶⁷ The top private employers in the county include Accenture, Amazon, Bloomberg BNA, Booz Allen Hamilton, Deloitte, Gartner, Grant Thornton, and Lockheed Martin.⁶⁸ Government employees make up 20 percent of the workforce, with the vast majority employed by the Department of Defense.⁶⁹



The Actors

Amazon

Founded by Jeff Bezos in 1994, Amazon started as an online book retailer. Its annual net income, or amount earned after deducting taxes, expenses, and interest, increased from \$1.1 billion in 2010 to \$33.4 billion in 2021.⁷⁰ Amazon is not only an online retailer, but also “a marketing platform, a delivery and logistics network, a payment service, a credit lender, an auction house, a major book publisher, a producer of television and films, a fashion designer, a hardware manufacturer, and a leading provider of cloud server space and computing power,” according to Lina Khan.⁷¹

Amazon Web Services (AWS)

As a cloud-computing platform, AWS is a lesser known but hugely profitable arm of Amazon. AWS has 3 primary products: EC2, a virtual machine service; Glacier, a low-cost cloud storage service; and S3, a storage system. AWS has grown at an astounding rate of about 30 percent per year; between 2020 and 2021, it grew by 32 percent, to reach \$13.5 billion in revenue. AWS accounted for 59 percent of the company’s \$22.9 billion profit before interest and taxes in 2020.⁷² AWS controls more than a third of the cloud market, almost double its next closest competitor, Microsoft Azure. AWS is used in 245 countries and territories.⁷³

Athena Coalition

Athena brings together local and national organizations that represent working people, small businesses, people of color, immigrants, along with activists, advocates, policy experts, and academics working to stop Amazon’s growing, powerful grip over our society and economy.⁷⁴ For Us, Not Amazon is a founding member of Athena.

Arlington County Board

The 5-member County Board is Arlington’s governing legislative body. Its members, elected at large, serve staggered 4-year terms.⁷⁵ The Chair, elected annually, is the official head of the county and presides over Board meetings.

Arlington County Police Department (ACPD)

The ACPD is the municipal law enforcement agency for Arlington County, employing 346 sworn officers. In fiscal year 2022, the ACPD’s budget was \$72,607,864.⁷⁶

For Us, Not Amazon (FUNA) Coalition

A coalition in Northern Virginia for working people, immigrants, and people of color opposed to the negative impacts of Amazon in Arlington and Virginia. Coalition members include La ColectiVA, Justice for Muslims Collective, Standing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) Northern Virginia, DC Tech Workers’ Coalition, Tenants and Workers United, Our Revolution Arlington, Sanctuary DMV, and Virginia Student Power Network

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)

Immigration and Customs Enforcement increasingly relies on high-tech tracking, detention, and deportation systems powered by companies like Amazon and Palantir, which is fueled by AWS. Amazon’s collection, storage, and data-management capabilities facilitate family separation and mass removal.⁷⁷

Justice for Muslims Collective **A collective with a mission**

to dismantle institutional and structural Islamophobia through raising political consciousness and shifting narratives, community empowerment, organizing and healing, and building alliances across movements in the greater Washington region. The group was established in October 2016 in response to the election of President Trump and increasing levels of Islamophobic rhetoric and hate crimes.⁷⁸

La ColectiVA

A collaborative of activists, artists, and other Latinx community members committed to upholding social justice and equity in Northern Virginia. Through door knocking, neighborhood meetings, and popular and political education, La ColectiVA supports efforts to organize neighbors, friends, and families, and to engage in issue-based campaigns focused on stopping abuses by police and ICE and ensuring housing, worker, and migrant rights.

PowerSwitch Action

A network of 20 grassroots organizations in cities across the country that form strategic alliances among labor, neighborhood, housing, racial justice, faith, ethnic, and environmental organizations to build people power and fight corporate power.

Ring

A subsidiary of Amazon that sells doorbell cameras and surveillance data. Amazon acquired the firm in 2018 for more than \$800 million.⁷⁹ Ring partners with more than 2,000 law-enforcement agencies across the country, including nearly 40 in Virginia, and runs a companion app called Neighbors.⁸⁰

Showing Up for Racial Justice Northern Virginia (SURJ NOVA)

SURJ NOVA is one chapter of a national network organizing white people for racial justice. It connects people across Northern Virginia while collaborating with local and national racial justice efforts. It also provides spaces to build relationships, skills, and political analysis to act for change.⁸¹



Glossary

Company Town

An area in which one company dominates the economy. In the United States, company towns came about during the Industrial Revolution, especially in isolated areas. The practices of giant corporations such as Amazon and Facebook have been called [modern company towns](#) because of their tendency to [create employee ecosystems](#)—from building massive headquarters that employ a significant share of the local population to purchasing large chunks of residential buildings, to building enormous corporate campuses.

Data Capitalism

An economic model built on the [extraction and commodification of data](#) and the use of big data and algorithms as tools to concentrate and [consolidate power](#) in ways that dramatically increase inequality along lines of race, class, gender, and disability.

Economic Democracy

Demos' [Economic Democracy project](#) interrogates how poor and working-class people, especially in Black and brown communities, can exercise greater control over the economic institutions that shape their lives. While Demos defines Economic Democracy as a framework that prioritizes the

deconcentration and redistribution of power over our economy from the billionaire financier and monopolist class to the multi-racial, multi-ethnic majority, it is also a framework used by other advocacy organizations and grassroots groups in different ways. For example, the Center for Economic Democracy defines it as a [framework for ways of life that prioritize people and planet over private profits](#).

JFK8

An Amazon fulfillment center—a warehouse where orders are received, stowed, packed, and shipped to customers—on Staten Island. Workers at JFK8 successfully unionized in April of 2022, making it the first Amazon warehouse in the U.S. to unionize. The effort grew out of workers' [protests](#) over unsafe COVID-19 protocols. The union known as Amazon Labor Union (ALU) was [spearheaded by](#) Derrick Palmer and Christian Smalls, 2 Black men who both worked at JFK8.

HQ2

Amazon's second corporate headquarters is located in Arlington County, Virginia. The company has projected investments of up to \$5 billion in the site, and employment of up to 50,000 workers in high-tech jobs. Construction is [expected](#) to finish in 2025.

Make Amazon Pay Campaign

An international coalition of trade unions, environmental organizations, and other advocates pushing Amazon to pay fair wages and taxes and operate sustainably. The campaign [demands](#) that Amazon change its policies and governments change their laws to improve working conditions, provide job security to all employees, end union-busting practices, and ensure that the company pay its taxes in full and commit to environmentally sustainable practices.

National Landing

The area in Northern Virginia announced as the location for Amazon's second headquarters, HQ2. The area is made up of 3 separate neighborhoods: Crystal City, Pentagon City, and Potomac Yard.

Up Against Amazon Institute

A training program hosted by FUNA designed to educate coalition members on how to fight Amazon in Northern Virginia. The curriculum has covered Amazon's impact on housing, workers' rights, and the local economy as well as Amazon's surveillance infrastructure and its threat to the environment.

Endnotes

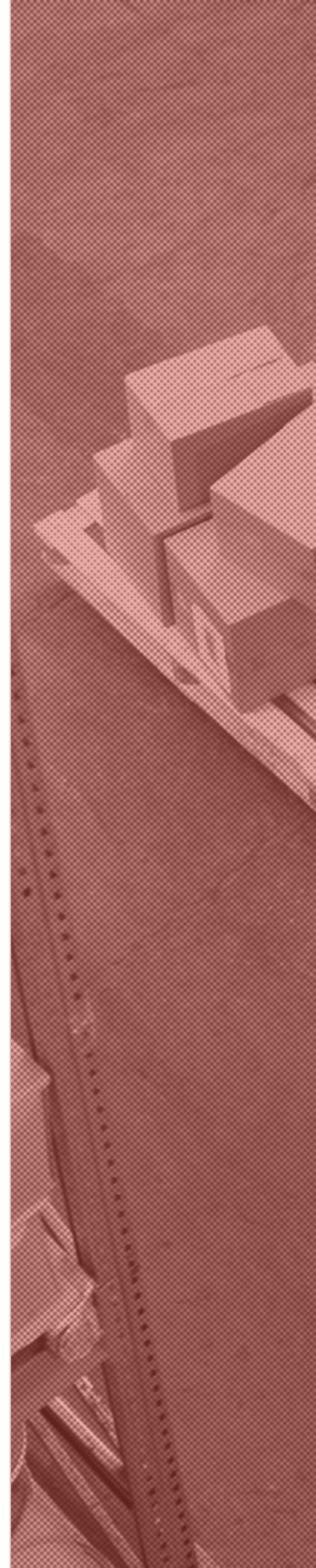
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* Bolded names indicate people interviewed for this case study.



Dēmos is an organization that powers the movement for a just, inclusive, multiracial democracy. Through cutting-edge policy research, inspiring litigation, and deep relationships with grass-roots organizations, Dēmos champions solutions that will create a democracy and economy rooted in racial equity.

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