

# The Guardian

## Cities across America should unite against big corporations

New York's resistance to Amazon's HQ2 is a model for a new kind of politics for cities to follow

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**W**e are from New York City and Seattle respectively. What unites us - and other major cities across the country - is that we are forced to make hard choices about equity, taxes, and jobs in the age of mega-corporations.

Seattle is the birthplace of Amazon. The city government has catered to corporations by refusing to tax them in ways that could benefit working people. When the Seattle city council repealed the Employee Head Tax in June 2018, it said goodbye to \$47.5m of revenue that could have gone toward deeply affordable housing. The people of New York City, on the other hand, chose a different path. Despite a full-court press from the mayor, the governor, and business interest groups, a grassroots movement of ordinary people defeated the richest man in the world. Amazon's lauded HQ2, which would have allowed the company to usurp millions of dollars in

public funds, was rejected by the people of Queens who correctly saw the deal as the blatant giveaway that it was.

On one hand, Seattle's actions were the latest act of political surrender to big business; on the other, activists across the country rightly took New York's resistance as proof that a better world without capitalist extortion of public resources is possible.

With Kshama Sawant on the Seattle City Council and socialists and progressives organizing to elect even more leftists in 2019, calls to tax the rich will not go away in Seattle; and after being vanquished in New York, Amazon may continue its search for a new city to land its second headquarters. But at a time of widening wealth inequalities, cities must learn how to stand in solidarity with one another. Our cities must refuse a race to the bottom to see who can offer up the most public resources to for-profit entities. If we stand our ground, we can usher in a new age of equity and prosperity for all. In the age of Amazon, cities need solidarity.

There was a time when organized labor underwrote the most socio-economically equal period in American history. From the end of World War II until the mid-1970s, trade and factory workers could count on stable pay and reliable benefits in places like Seattle. The federal government played a major part in this post-war prosperity by subsidizing both urban and suburban housing, so that working families could save money and get ahead. After a corporate backlash in the 1970s, the free-market philosophy of Reagan-era America combined with widespread deindustrialization to dismantle this redistributive policy framework.

Using mass layoffs and casualized ("flexible") labor, corporate America has kept the working class in a state of perpetual anxiety for the last four decades. The declining fortunes of working families is the result of capitalism's war on organized labor, with the percentage of unionized workers in America dramatically decreasing from 33 percent in 1955, to 20 percent in 1983, to 10.7 percent in 2017. Meanwhile, federal housing investments have also declined sharply since the 1970s. As professor Jason Hackworth wrote in his 2010 book *The Neoliberal City*, "gone are the days of the federal government providing direct subsidies to house the most acutely poor." Stagnating wages combined with mounting costs-of-living have spelled doom for working people.

Just like workers have been pit against one another to ensure employers have their pick of desperate employees who are willing to work for less and less, cities believe they have no choice but to compete against one another for corporate suitors. There is only one antidote to this state of affairs: solidarity.

Labor leaders have long understood what solidarity means. If your co-workers organize for better pay, you do not try to take their place by posing as less of a "problem" employee to your boss. And if there is a strike, you do not cross the picket line. Cities have been slower to grasp these lessons. Like sports teams hoping to land the next big-name free agent, they sacrifice themselves on the altar of capital, offering up tax incentives and perks that their rivals do not.

A considerable part of this race to the bottom has involved sabotaging organized labor. Amazon has not been known for its friendliness to unions. In September 2018, the company's union-busting techniques were made known to the world when Gizmodo revealed a 45-minute anti-union video that circulated among Amazon management. "We do not believe unions are in the best interest of our customers [and] our shareholders," the video brazenly declared. Unsurprisingly, Amazon's negotiations with New York City suddenly broke down the day after

union officials pressed the company for stronger worker protections and a promise to allow workers to unionize.

Cities should not allow anti-union corporations to take root in our communities. State legislatures across the country should come together to ban taxpayer funded giveaways to corporations. Political candidates should refuse corporate contributions and the corruption that comes with them. In essence, what we need is a strike; but instead of withholding labor, we withhold public resources. We must also build the political will to make our federal government re-prioritize investments in affordable housing, child care, and social services. In the meantime, cities must not cross the picket line.

If we stand firm, major corporations will have to change how they do business. They might have to discontinue the kind of union-busting activity that Amazon has been known for. Like Microsoft, they might increase the philanthropic contributions they make towards local housing solutions. Or maybe they'll finally pay their fair share of taxes. As any labor organizer will tell you, direct action gets the goods. When cities stand up for themselves, they stand up for each other.

We can live in cities that marshal public space and resources for the common good. To do so, we'll have to band together. We'll have to resist forfeiting the public trust for the private gain of a few.

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