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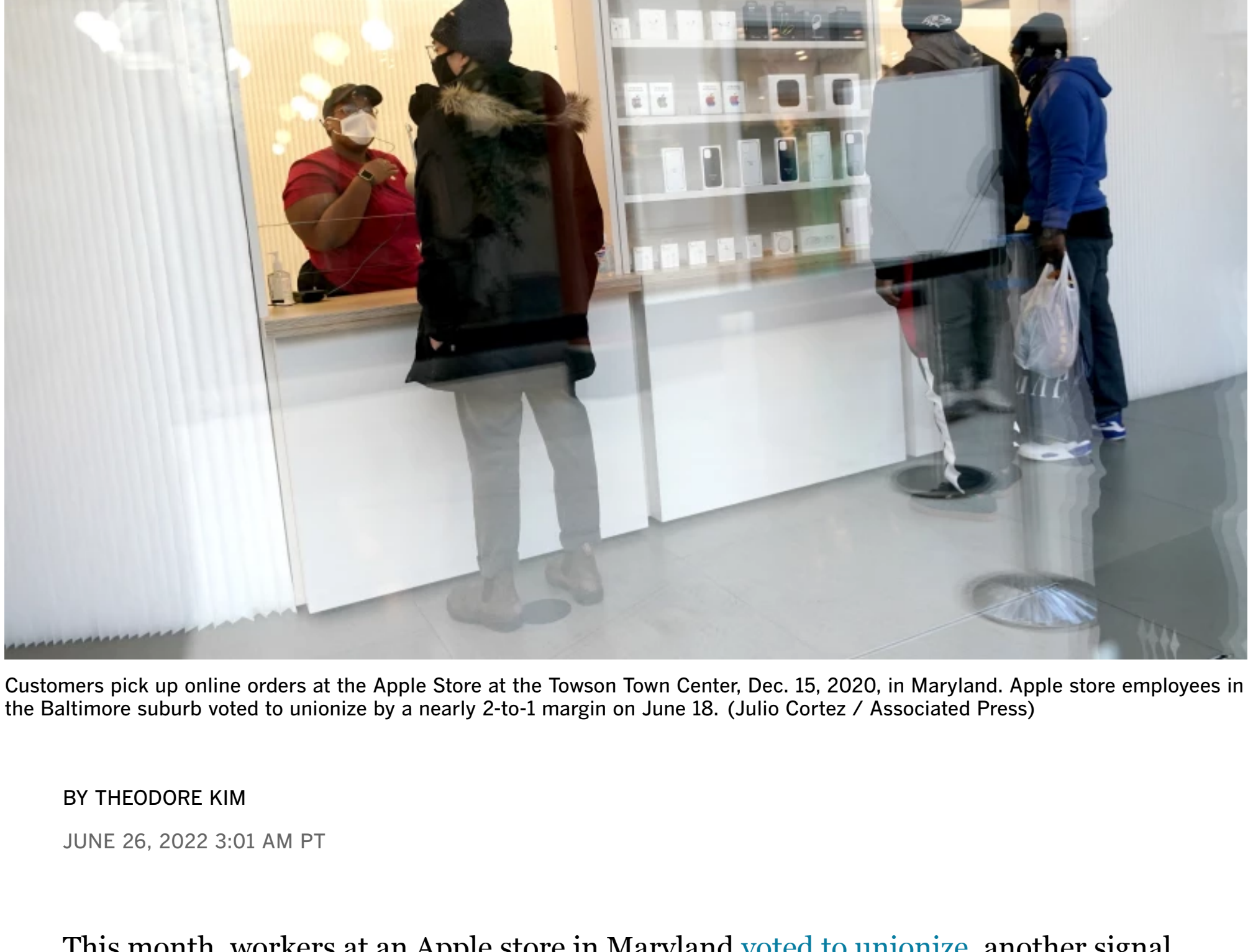
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OPINION



Op-Ed: The rise of tech unions shows workers reckoning with reality



Customers pick up online orders at the Apple Store at the Towson Town Center, Dec. 15, 2020, in Maryland. Apple store employees in the Baltimore suburb voted to unionize by a nearly 2-to-1 margin on June 18. (Julio Cortez / Associated Press)

BY THEODORE KIM
JUNE 26, 2022 3:01 AM PT

This month, workers at an Apple store in Maryland [voted to unionize](#), another signal that the labor movement is [gaining momentum](#) at tech companies. This follows a victory at an Amazon Staten Island warehouse in March, the first U.S. union vote in Amazon's history (though [another company warehouse](#) voted against unionizing in May).

Tech is largely thought of as a cushy industry, dominated by big companies with relatively generous wages and benefits. Apple store workers unionizing is especially significant because their positions are already considered "good" retail jobs; the corporation raised its [hourly wage](#) from \$20 to \$22 last month to compensate store workers, who are highly knowledgeable about the company's products. One of the newly unionized store's organizers directly stated to the New York Times: "[We love our jobs](#). We just want to see them do better."



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That statement resonates with efforts among tech's software engineers and other knowledge workers who are pushing for change despite having some of the highest-paid and most desirable positions in the country.

Workers at Google have been [organizing](#) since [January](#) of last year, bringing together full-time and temporary employees, contractors and vendors. Employees at the crowdfunding website Kickstarter announced in 2020 that they became "the first major tech company" to [unionize](#).



Most striking are examples from the video game industry, where the work is both ultra-competitive and considered a labor of love. The indie studio Voodoo Games became the first video game company in North America to unionize in [December 2021](#), while Raven Software at the Santa Monica-based Activision Blizzard, one of the biggest video game studios in the world, voted to unionize in [May 2022](#). Microsoft, which made a deal this year to acquire Activision Blizzard, recently [pledged to work constructively](#) with employees seeking to unionize, a move viewed by some in the industry as confirmation of labor's growing foothold in tech.

What compels workers with these "good" jobs to organize? One reason is that without an organization to advocate for the values of its employees, the conditions of any job are contingent on the benevolence of management.

At Pixar, where I used to work, years of progress in [supporting LGBTQ rights](#) were undermined when the studio cut a gay kiss from the movie "Lightyear." [Restoring the kiss](#) took employees organizing to issue a joint statement rejecting the censorship: exactly the sort of unified voice that unionization aims to provide. Or the reasons could be as basic as workplace safety: This month, Google reportedly postponed its requirement for Google Maps contractors to [return to the office](#) five days a week because the workers threatened to strike.



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Moreover, while software jobs and other knowledge work seem secure, they are not immune from a threat that more often mobilizes non-tech industries: automation. Writing computer code — authoring complex streams of text that tell computers exactly what to do — has long been considered a task that only human software engineers can accomplish. But recent machine learning models, such as DeepMind's [AlphaCode](#) and OpenAI's [Codex](#), suggest that AI could write computer code in the future.

[Fawning tech reporting](#) may insist that machines are only decreasing our drudge work and can never replace humans. But that view elides one of the basic realities of software development: lots of it can be routine and repetitive drudge work. Much of it consists of cutting and pasting existing code into a new context, or simply hunting down the right software library routine to accomplish a task, like finding the virtual socket that matches your virtual plug.

To be sure, programming also involves leaps of human creativity that are not close to being automated. But if the routine aspects start getting outsourced to AI, where does checking the AI work end and the human programming work begin? The job begins to sound less appealing — and less valuable to employers.

Imagine the paradox of being a programmer where the more high-quality work you do, the less secure your job becomes. Rather than boosting your professional reputation, the growing corpus of code you write is used to train a gradually more sophisticated AI. It eventually becomes "good enough" for some of your routine tasks and gets reassigned those duties. Does your salary get reassigned too?

Some programmers might pursue individual resistance by writing deliberately grotesque and byzantine code: Write it like "Finnegans Wake" instead of "Goodnight Moon." Some Indian IT workers in Europe with weak job security [have reported creating roadblocks to understanding their code](#), following the logic that if nobody understands how the program works except you, the bosses have to keep you around.

Unions present an alternative to such soul-crushingly baroque — and tenuous — forms of self-protection. A union can bargain with management to, for example, prevent AI from spying over your shoulder until it can supplant your job.

More workers in tech seem to be waking up to the reality that if you have a good job and want it to stay that way, you cannot rely solely on management's assurances. Unionization is a basic bulwark against a turbulent future. The union victory for Apple's retail workers carries lessons for Apple's engineers too.

Theodore Kim is an associate professor of computer science at Yale University. [@_TheodoreKim](#)

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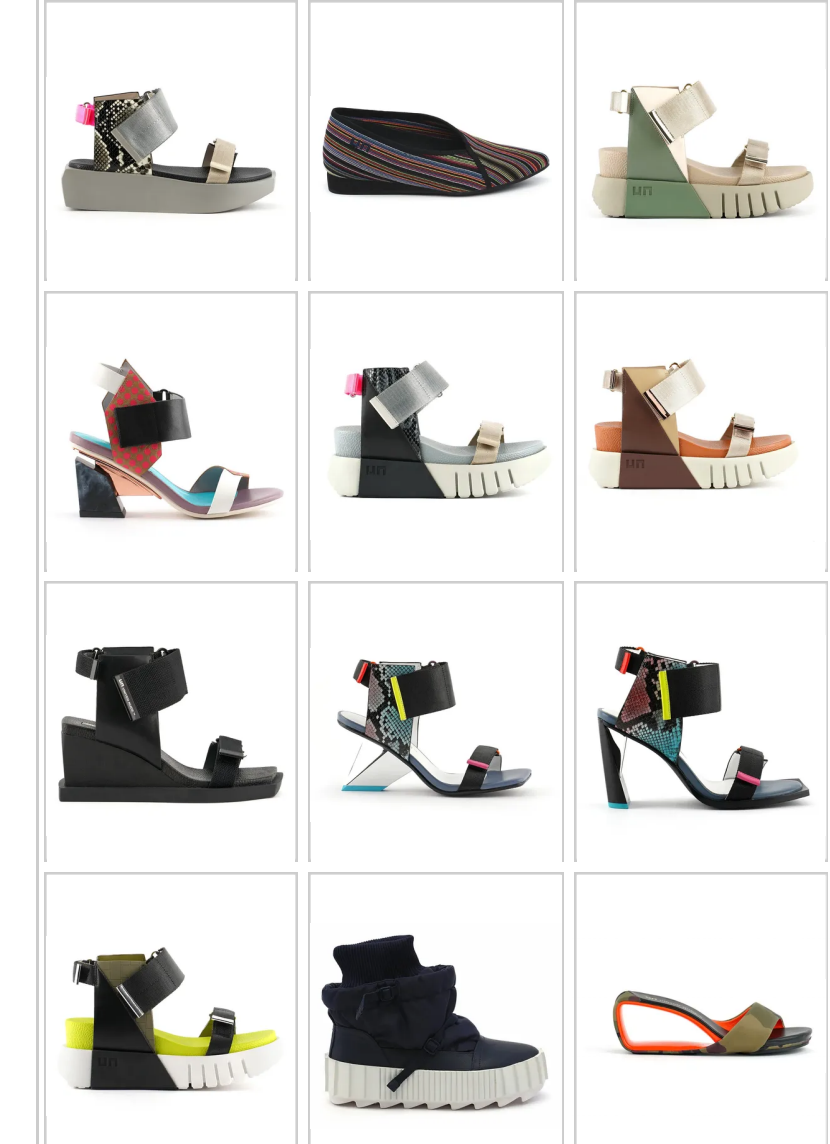
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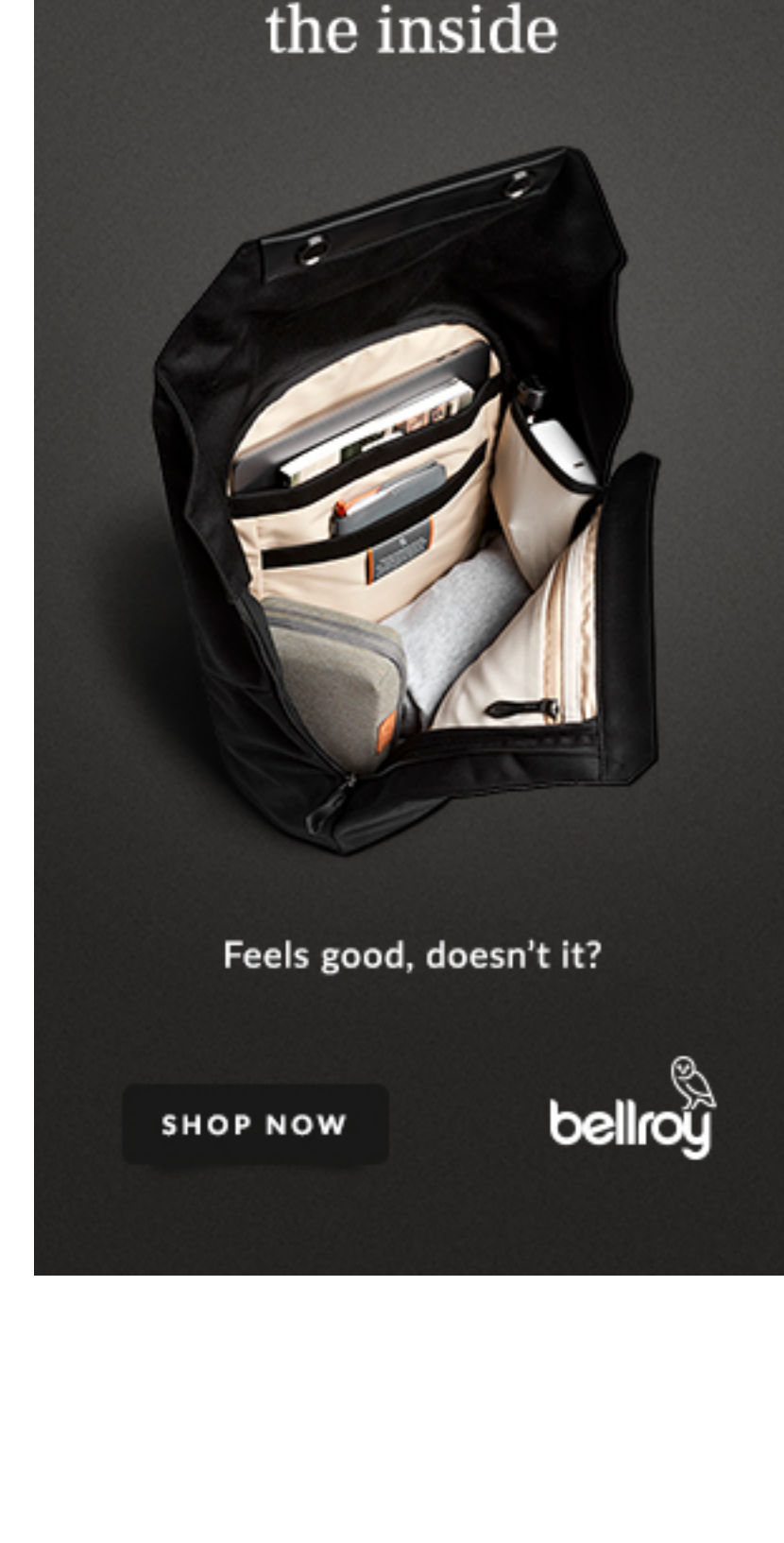
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