

“It is like a pyramid scheme and we’re the worker ants at the bottom”

Amazon workers in Downriver Michigan speak to SEP candidate Niles Niemuth

By our reporters
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With a week to go before the November 6 midterm elections, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Michigan’s 12 congressional district Niles Niemuth and a campaign team spoke with workers at the recently-opened Amazon facility in Romulus, the western most city in Detroit’s Downriver suburbs. The facility lies just outside the boundaries of the congressional district but employs workers from throughout the area.

Romulus, like the rest of Downriver, is home to a working-class population of nearly 24,000 people. The region has been devastated by deindustrialization over the past 30 years. The largest single employer is now the Detroit Metropolitan Airport, which offers largely low-wage service jobs, where many Amazon employees work as a second job.

The Amazon facility in Romulus was opened in August and built with a \$5 million grant provided by the Michigan state government. Amazon routinely selects areas that are hit by high unemployment and underemployment, where workers have no choice but to accept the brutal conditions and poverty level wages that it offers. For many workers in Romulus, Amazon is a relative improvement compared to fast-food jobs with no benefits.

The recent announcement that the minimum wage will eventually be \$15 an hour—which is yet to kick in for many workers at the Amazon facility—has also made the job more attractive, despite the fact that this wage would condemn workers to a lifetime of poverty and make many unable to collect any government assistance.

Aaliyah and Katera, both 20 years old, have been working at Amazon for a month and a half while they study nursing. “I have about \$17,300 in student loans,” Katera said, “and I’m making \$12.75 an hour here.”

“The employers know that there is nothing here for us, so they offer us low wages because nowhere else will give us so many hours,” Katera said. “If you’re a young person around here, you can get a job at Wendy’s or other fast food. Really it is like a pyramid scheme, and we’re the worker ants at the bottom.”

Aaliyah and Katera had heard about the Trump administration’s decision to deploy over 5,000 troops to the southern border against immigrant workers seeking to enter the US. Katera said, “I hate the Trump administration. These attacks on the immigrants are being used to try to get people to follow him, people who don’t understand that other workers are just trying to come here for a chance at living.”

Neither Katera nor Aaliyah believed that the Democrats were an opposition to the Trump administration. “All the Democrats are really worried about is big business,” Katera said. “They want to make sure the people who are already making a lot of money are doing OK. My whole life they’ve been doing something and messing with someone in the Middle East. It’s really just about keeping our feet in other places.”

Katera noted the recent attacks on food stamp eligibility by the Trump administration. “Now Trump is hitting the people with the least,” she said. “How do you expect a mother trying to work 40 hours when she has young kids and no car? They’re not giving you a

choice.” Aaliyah added: “And then when you get a job, it’s minimum wage.”

They were both angered by the fact that Amazon’s CEO Jeff Bezos—the world’s richest man—has a personal wealth of over \$150 billion, the product of the brutal exploitation of more than 500,000 Amazon workers all around the world. “My whole life, I’ve never seen much money,” Katera said. “So, to think that someone has \$150 billion, what can you do with that? What are you going to do? It could be spread out so much better to the world’s people.”

“We’re 20 and we’re working here,” Katera said. “But my back hurts at the end of the day. And there are people who are 40 and 50 years old working here trying to make ends meet. It’s so wrong.”

Many of the workers who had worked at Amazon for longer than Katera and Aaliyah were actually negatively affected by Amazon’s announcement of a \$15 minimum wage last month. “For us, we appreciate it because it’s a bit of extra change. But some of these other workers lost their bonuses, their shares, so what they were given was taken away.”

Niles explained that his campaign for Congress was aimed at building a political movement of the working class, in opposition to both the Democrats and Republicans, for socialism. This would include the transformation of the giant corporations like Amazon into public utilities, democratically controlled by the working class as a whole, as part of the organization of the economy according to scientific planning, rather than private profit.

“I like what you guys are talking about,” Katera responded. “I need to Google this and find out more.”

Niles also spoke with Ed, a hi-lo forklift driver at a different logistics company, who was picking up his girlfriend at the end of her shift at Amazon. “Either way, I agree the working class should control the profits in society today,” he told me. “All my life I’ve been on the Democratic side because we’ve never been in the high tax bracket, but everything has been the same since I’ve been younger. At some point the things we need like healthcare, someone is going to have to pay for it: either the upper class or the working class.”

Ares, another young Amazon worker, said he was outraged by the decision to send the military against immigrants at the border. “The military tried to recruit

me at college,” he told us angrily. “They offered me \$1,600 and to pay my tuition. That’s how they get people to join. But I think about it, and how can you fight for an organization, for a country, that doesn’t support you? The way I see all these wars we are in all over the world are: ‘I want this, and I am going to take it from you, and I don’t care how many people die so that we can get it.’”

Colin, a 25-year-old worker, was working just his fourth day at the Amazon plant. He was previously a cook for Sky Chefs at the nearby Detroit Metro Airport also in Romulus. “I went to school to be a cook,” he said. “I have the same amount of debt as if I’d bought a Porsche: \$60,000. School is the biggest scam in the United States.”

“The Democrats and Republicans say there is no money for universal free tuition but there is money,” he said. “They want to hold on to it for the rich, to use it so they stay rich and for us to stay poor. There is no middle class in America anymore, just rich and poor.”

Colin had his own analogy for describing the sham “choice” that workers are offered every election between the Democrats and Republicans. “It is like choosing Android or iPhone,” he said. “Basically, they do the same thing with a different brand. I used to be for the Democrats. The Republicans will just cut everything and then the people are left with nothing. We need food stamps and many people can’t work. I have friends on it and I used to be on it. But the Democrats do the same thing in a different way, by moving money around more quietly.”

“You guys seem to be the wedge to just get rid of both parties,” he said. “I like it. Ninety percent of people work and we’re not represented.”

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