

Australian Amazon worker alleges unfair dismissal

By Oscar Grenfell
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A worker who was employed by a labour hire firm at Amazon's Sydney warehouse has launched legal action alleging that he was unfairly dismissed for joining a trade union and asking management for a greater number of hours per week.

According to an article in the *Guardian* on Tuesday, the worker, named only as Raj, has initiated a general protections case in the Fair Work Commission, the federal industrial tribunal, demanding reinstatement. An initial hearing, held on November 29, did not resolve the dispute, and the case is likely to come before a federal court next year.

The allegations shed further light on the draconian regime that prevails in warehouses operated by the global retail giant around the world. It follows dozens of reports of workplace injuries and unfair terminations, along with onerous working conditions and poverty-level wages.

The unions backing Raj's case, however, including the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA) and the Transport Workers Union (TWU), have cynically latched onto the dispute as part of their bid to prevent labour hire companies undermining their own role as an industrial police force of the major corporations.

According to the *Guardian*, Raj worked as a forklift driver at Amazon's Sydney facility after being hired by Adecco, the labour hire firm that provides the company with the bulk of its workforce.

Raj was reportedly the first employee at the Sydney warehouse to join the SDA. Raj, and the union, claim that he was directed by management not to wear an SDA cap and lanyard during work hours. Management also allegedly objected to union organisers distributing leaflets to workers.

The *Guardian* stated that Raj became involved in a dispute with Adecco after asking for more work hours. On October 5, he met with a union official at the Amazon

centre while a member of management was in the room. Four days later, on October 9, he was dismissed by Adecco. The company has denied that his sacking was connected to union activity or his request for more hours.

In a video produced by the SDA, Raj stated: "It is unfair treatment just because I'm in the union. I need to pay the bills, so I need a job, without a job you can't survive. What happened to me was not fair. I just want to get back to work at Amazon."

The case points to the extreme nervousness of Amazon over the prospect of any opposition emerging from its super-exploited workforce.

The company has a global contract with Adecco to supply labour. As a result, the vast majority of its workforce is not employed by Amazon. This is aimed at suppressing any push for wages, minimising Amazon's liability and employing Adecco's "labour management" practices to suppress any unrest.

Amazon began operations at its Melbourne warehouse at the end of 2017, at a 24,000 square metre facility in the working-class suburb of Dandenong. A substantial proportion of its workforce, numbering several hundred, is made up of lowly-paid migrant workers.

The company launched a Sydney facility earlier this year. Workers are employed on the Road, Transport and Distribution Award, which provides for a minimum wage of just \$19.37 per hour. As casuals, they are not entitled to sick pay, holiday pay and other entitlements.

In comments published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last September, one Australian Amazon employee described his workplace as a "hellscape."

"I've never worked anywhere as harsh, and it's frustrating because the head of Amazon is the richest man on the planet," the worker said. In July, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos' personal net wealth surpassed \$150 billion, making him the richest individual in modern world history. Bezos' fortune grows by around \$US3,000 every

second.

According to the *Sydney Morning Herald* article, Amazon workers, termed “associates” by the company, begin each day with group stretching exercises. They are then required to share “Amazon success stories,” before being led in a team chant extolling the company by managers.

Workers told the Fairfax-owned publication that they are given electronic scanners which direct them to aisles in the facility to collect products.

The scanner has a black bar at the bottom of the screen, counting down how much time they have left to reach the next item. If a worker fails to reach the product quickly enough, their pick rate is marked down. Workers who do not meet their targets have allegedly had subsequent shifts cancelled. Because the employees are casuals, they can also be instructed at short notice that they are not required to work when orders are down.

A worker stated that the targets meant, “You end up not being able to function because you’re so nervous and stressed out.” Another said it was common not to drink water, or use the bathroom during gruelling shifts, for fear of falling behind. They alleged some workers did not report injuries for fear of losing their job.

The conditions are a microcosm of the brutal character of modern capitalism, with millions of workers facing low-paid, casual work and unbearable conditions, at companies owned by a tiny corporate and financial elite. There is undoubtedly widespread opposition among Amazon workers.

The campaign, launched by the SDA and the TWU this month, to form an Online Retail & Delivery Workers Alliance and establish a foothold at Amazon, is a trap for workers and an utter fraud.

The SDA and the TWU are concerned that the use of labour hire companies by Amazon and other corporations cuts them out of the “bargaining” process, through which the unions have slashed the jobs, wages and conditions of the workers they falsely claim to represent for the past three decades, while ensuring the privileges and substantial salaries of union officials.

The SDA and the TWU, like all of the unions, have functioned as ruthless enforcers of the dictates of big business and the banks.

The SDA has brokered countless deals with employers, cutting real wages and eliminating existing conditions. In 2015, for instance, the union signed agreements with retail and fast food chains, including Coles, Woolworths, KFC and Hungry Jacks, that slashed or eliminated penalty

wages and resulted in 250,000 low-paid employees receiving below poverty-level award rates. The SDA and Business South Australia agreement in 2015 reduced Sunday penalty rates for 40,000 shop assistants by 50 percent.

The TWU has overseen the destruction of thousands of warehouse jobs across the country. Like other unions, its Victorian transport division operates a Transport, Logistics, Advocacy and Training Association, which has raised money for the TWU directly from major transport businesses.

The rotten record of the unions makes clear that workers can only advance their interests through a complete break with these corporatised entities, and the establishment of new organisations of struggle, including independent rank and file committees.

In 2017, the *World Socialist Web Site* established the *International Amazon Workers Newsletter*. It has published exposures of the conditions facing Amazon workers all over the world and has created a vehicle for Amazon workers to unify their struggles internationally. We urge all workers to sign-up today and contact us.

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