

“ We should be the ones deciding how this could be run to be safe for us”

Amazon warehouse workers describe unsafe conditions and discuss forming workplace committees

By Douglas Lyons and Samuel Davidson
31 March 2020

Unrest continues to develop among Amazon workers throughout the country over the continuation of non-essential work and the lack of adequate safety measures during the deadly COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the number of workers who have tested positive for the virus continues to rise.

Amazon workers from many areas have spoken with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the conditions they are working under and to express support for the formation of workplace committees to impose safety measures.

Workers at the JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island, New York announced yesterday that they plan to walk out today to protest the prevailing conditions, including the lack of transparency from management about the number of workers who have developed symptoms. There are 4,500 workers at the JFK8 warehouse, and workers have declared that they will “cease all operations” until their demands are met.

At warehouses around the country, the company has attempted to appease workers by implementing a handful of low-cost, bare-bones safety procedures. “They put in a few measures to make it look like they are doing something, but the bottom line is they don’t care about our safety,” said an Amazon worker in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania who wished to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation.

“I work overnight from 6:30 p.m. to 5 a.m. in the morning. Now some people come in at 6:15, 6:30 and 6:45. It doesn’t really make a difference. They took off

the doors and staggered our shifts but everyone still has to walk through and touch the turnstiles,” she explained.

“In the break room they took out most of the chairs, and marked on the floor where the remaining chairs could sit so they are six feet apart. But it doesn’t matter what they do in the break room, we all still stand next to each other on the line. I feel more should be done. Every warehouse should be shut down for two weeks so that they know who is sick. I feel like we don’t matter to them.”

Amazon operates nearly a dozen fulfillment and distribution centers in and around the Harrisburg area in central Pennsylvania. The centers are located within a two hour drive of some of Amazon’s major east coast markets including Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, DC, Northern Virginia and the northeastern Pennsylvania cities of Scranton, Allentown, Bethlehem and Reading.

In addition to shipping to east coast markets, Philadelphia and Baltimore are port cities, which receive goods from overseas. The Harrisburg worker commented: “We ship everywhere. I send packages to California and the west coast all the time.

“They don’t need to keep all of these warehouses open. I’m proud of the fact that I help people get toilet paper, paper towels and cleaning supplies, but we shouldn’t be shipping bicycles and skateboards right now.

“All he cares about is money,” she said, referring to

Amazon's CEO Jeff Bezos.

"Bezos makes billions, and he doesn't care about us," she added. "He should have to come work in the warehouses and see what it's like and have to live on what we make."

Most Amazon workers make a poverty wage of \$15 an hour and cannot afford to be off of work without pay.

"They say anyone can take PTO [personal time off] but you don't get paid. Most of these people need the money, they have bills to pay and families to support. They wouldn't even get unemployment. You shouldn't have to risk your own life and that of your family just so Bezos can get rich.

"I have children at home, one suffers from cerebral palsy . I am very scared of what would happen if he got infected. Every day it is a struggle with me if I should go to work. It is a tough decision. I don't feel any appreciation for my job.

"What really made me mad was when I heard about what they did in Queens when they learned that one of the workers was sick. They were only going to shut down for a few hours, the workers got real mad and they shut it for two days. That is not long enough to make sure the virus didn't spread."

The *New York Post* reports that a worker at a Staten Island warehouse tested positive, and while the company sent that employee home, management did not even inform the other workers in the warehouse.

"I support the forming of workers committees," the worker in Harrisburg said. "We should be the ones deciding how this could be run to be safe for us."

"Amazon is killing people by not shutting down," said Troy, an Amazon worker in South Carolina. "I went to work the other day and couldn't stay to risk my health for unnecessary items. At the same time I have to go because I need money to survive. So basically it is murder and they should be charged with murder after all this [i.e., the pandemic] is done."

"I feel like Amazon is part of the problem and I disagree with how they are doing things. They say they are practicing social distancing but it is really confined spaces. ... It is just sickening that they are saying we are a necessary facility. We are a 'softline'— we sell mostly clothes. And since they won't shut down, I have to work because I can't get [financial] help with them still being open.

"We are all scared and we have to work because we can't get help. I have a son that is in remission of cancer and has had heart surgery. If he gets sick it will probably kill him. He has been through enough.

"They aren't providing PPE [personal protective equipment] and it is impossible to social distance," he added. "Amazon needs to give us time off with pay. It is time to look out for the ones who have helped make the company millions. It is time to give back and show America they have a heart and not just a wallet."

The WSWS pointed to the numerous wildcat walkouts and sickouts happening across the world. Troy responded that he had not heard about these but said, "Amazon and the media hide it from us [workers]."

Jill, a worker at a Pittsburgh warehouse said, "He [Jeff Bezos] doesn't care about us, he has always been just about making money. We are shipping all kinds of things that have nothing to do with staying healthy and clean. Workers should control how the safety is done."

"The politicians don't care either," Jill concluded. "Trump keeps talking about how great of a response he has made, but the virus is killing people. People need protective equipment, ventilators. All the companies want is to make money. I agree, we need to organize and run this ourselves."

Amazon workers, we want to hear from you. How is the COVID-19 crisis affecting you and your workplace? Get in touch with us here to tell your story.

Google is blocking the *World Socialist Web Site* from search results.

To fight this blacklisting:

Share this article with friends and coworkers

- Facebook
- Twitter
- E-Mail
- Reddit

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>