

“The cops have no concern for the people they’re shooting at”

Amazon workers declare support for mass protests as management imposes pay cut

By Tom Carter
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Starting on May 30, Amazon workers began working without the temporary \$2 per hour “hazard pay” raise that was implemented as anger over the spread of the COVID-19 disease in workplaces peaked in mid-March. Management announced last month that the pay raise and increased overtime pay, which had been used to coax workers back into the warehouses, would be eliminated.

Amazon has also eliminated its policy of allowing unlimited unpaid time off for sick workers, which will have the effect of forcing sick workers to continue working despite the danger to themselves and co-workers. With the elimination of the unpaid time off Amazon is working in conjunction with US President Donald Trump, who is forcing employees back into dangerous workplaces under the threat of the loss of income and economic destitution.

Like other corporations, Amazon’s management has responded to the wave of mass protests following the murder of George Floyd by issuing hypocritical statements about its supposed opposition to racism and inequality. “The inequitable and brutal treatment of black people in our country must stop,” Amazon’s single statement begins.

In reality, Amazon has no intention of disturbing its extensive contracts with police agencies around the country, to which it promotes its brand of face-recognition software called Rekognition.

According to Amazon’s own advertisements: “With Amazon Rekognition, you can identify objects, people, text, scenes, and activities in images and videos, as well as detect any inappropriate content. Amazon Rekognition also provides highly accurate facial analysis and facial search capabilities that you can use

to detect, analyze, and compare faces for a wide variety of user verification, people counting, and public safety use cases.”

Not only is this a frightening tool in the hands of America’s authoritarian and militarized police, who are no doubt using it at this very moment to monitor and suppress protests, but it can be used directly alongside discriminatory racial profiling.

“I’m in full support of the protesting,” said Mona Williams, who was injured at Amazon fulfillment center Coppell, Texas, speaking to the *International Amazon Workers’ Voice*. “I have voiced my opinions and views online,” she added. “My son has been on the front lines protesting in Nebraska.”

She warned that Amazon management would not look kindly on any effort to bring the demands of Amazon workers for safer working conditions into the ongoing mass protests. “You are just a number at Amazon,” she said, describing how she used to see ambulances lined up outside her warehouse to pick up workers who were injured or dropped from exhaustion.

“When I was injured, I was treated like a nobody,” she explained. “I just decided to leave.”

“It’s time for a change,” she said. “It’s time for them to realize that our lives are important. If it wasn’t for us blue-collar workers, this world would not be moving the way it’s moving.”

Julius, an Amazon sortation worker at Teterboro, New Jersey, was recently fired for leaning on the edge of a mechanical conveyor belt at the end of a shift. It was hot in the warehouse, and he was exhausted.

“I think the protests themselves are warranted, considering how badly the cops treat the people,” Julius said. “The fact that they’re using pepper spray

and rubber bullets is ridiculous. They have no concern for the people that they're shooting at. They're getting away with it, even when they attack foreign reporters."

Julius pointed to the international character of the protests. He was happy to see workers in different countries stand by each other, "but I don't think the leaders of those [other] nations are happy about what's happening."

In the US, the Democrats are "complicit in it all," he added. "They see some cops ram through protesters in a wide-open street," he said, and do little or nothing in response. "The Democrats aren't doing anything for us. They had the chance to, but they're not calling [Trump] out on it."

The number of Amazon workers who have contracted the deadly coronavirus continues to rise, although Amazon is deliberately covering up the extent of the infections.

The company has acknowledged eight deaths reported by the news media but has refused to cooperate with local authorities or provide national or statewide statistics on the number of workers who have fallen sick or died. In 13 states, the attorney general's office has formally requested these numbers, which Amazon has not made publicly available.

According to statistics that have been assembled second-hand by Amazon workers on social media, workers have contracted the virus at as many as three-fourths of US warehouses. A study carried out by the *Louisville Courier Journal*, which was limited to Kentucky and Southern Indiana, uncovered at least six cases at SDF9 (Shepherdsville) and at least four cases at SDF4 (also in Shepherdsville). It also found at least 12 cases and one death at SDF8 (Jeffersonville, Indiana), at least nine cases at LEX1 (Lexington), and at least eight cases at LEX2 (also in Lexington).

Given the current state of testing in the United States and the lack of information directly from Amazon, the true numbers are certainly much higher.

Meanwhile, the fortune of Amazon oligarch Jeff Bezos, the world's richest man, has soared. While workers were pushed to make rate without adequate safety equipment, gloves, or masks, Bezos's net wealth climbed tens of billions of dollars. It is now over \$150 billion.

Amazon worker Barbara Chandler, who contracted the virus in March at Amazon's Staten Island

warehouse in New York, recently filed a lawsuit alleging that Amazon's lax safety practices put her at risk. Amazon workers, the lawsuit states, "were explicitly or implicitly encouraged to continue attending work and prevented from adequately washing their hands or sanitizing their workstations."

The Amazon conglomerate took advantage of cheap borrowing costs to raise \$10 billion in the corporate bond market last week, according to a report in the *Financial Times*. Meanwhile, Amazon sits on a cash hoard valued in the tens of billions, which it will use to gobble up businesses and entire industries that flounder in the present turmoil and expand its reach globally.

In order to pay back the bondholders, Amazon will ramp up the exploitation of workers throwing whatever minor safety precautions that have been put into place out the window.

It was reported Friday that a distribution center in Redlands, California was engulfed in a massive fire that caused the roof to collapse. The distribution center was focused on extra-large items. No injuries among workers have been reported, and the cause of the fire remains under investigation.

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