Amazon workers denounce working conditions

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In recent years, Amazon has become one of the fastest-growing and most valuable companies in the world. According to the *Financial Times* Global 500 rankings, Amazon has the fourth greatest market capitalization, jumping from 33rd in 2015 and now trailing only Apple, Google and Microsoft.

The Seattle, Washington-based online retail giant has an estimated 341,000 employees in at least 30 countries around the world. At the end of 2016, Amazon had roughly 180,000 full-time employees in the US, a six-fold increase since 2011. In January, the company announced plans to hire 100,000 more full-time workers in the US by mid-2018. This will be largely through the building of new fulfillment centers (warehouses as large as one-million square-feet or roughly the size of 28 football fields), which contain inventory from suppliers and enable Amazon to increasingly offer same-day delivery services for many of its products.

The rise of Amazon has funneled unfathomable wealth to the company's founder, chairman and CEO, Jeff Bezos, who recently surpassed Warren Buffett to become the second-richest person in the world, with a total wealth of $76.9 billion. In 2016 alone, Bezos amassed $27.6 billion, largely through the rise in the value of company shares. This amount is enough to pay each of Amazon's worldwide employees a salary of $80,938, or a wage of roughly $39 per hour.

The immense wealth accumulated by Bezos has been produced by the labor of Amazon workers, who are highly exploited and paid close to the minimum wage for highly physically-demanding work. The company uses state-of-the-art technology to maximize the output it extracts from every worker and has been routinely cited for workplace safety violations and abuse.

"Pickers," warehouse workers who collect items scheduled for delivery, are required to wear tracking devices and routinely walk upwards of 15 miles during a shift. They are reprimanded and even fired by supervisors if their data shows any inefficiencies.

A 2014 article in Wired magazine noted "the rapid-fire way that warehouse workers" physically move and package items. "The packing stations are a whirl of activity where algorithms test human endurance. Orders stream down a computer screen that indicate the proper box size for each. Rollers spit out the bags of sealed air used to cushion items in the boxes and the tape to seal them. Workers whip through the folding, packing, and sealing of boxes at a speed that could only come through days, months, and years of practice. The pace cannot slow if Amazon wants to meet the demand the company itself has stoked through the speed and reliability of its fulfillment operation."

In June 2014, 52-year-old Jody Rhoads was killed when machinery she was operating to move pallets crashed into shelving and pinned her at a fulfillment center in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. In another notorious incident in 2011, management at an Amazon warehouse in Breinigsville, Pennsylvania refused to open their doors to provide ventilation as temperatures reached 110 degrees. When workers began collapsing on the job, the company simply paid to have ambulances on standby outside the facility to shuttle workers to the hospital.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team recently spoke with Amazon workers in Tracy, California, 63 miles east of San Francisco. It quickly became clear that management has tried to create an atmosphere of intimidation to prevent workers from speaking out against poor working conditions. A worker with three years' experience, at first apprehensive about speaking to a WSWS reporter, nevertheless chose to talk briefly without giving his name. Referring to the risk he was taking, the worker said, "A lot have been fired for a lot less."

During job training workers are told speaking to the media is against company policy and could result in immediate dismissal. "I knew someone who was fired simply for saying the word 'union' and being overheard by a manager," the worker told the WSWS. "The company has threatened to shut down and relocate entire fulfillment centers if they hear enough talk about forming a union."

Another worker said the starting wage at the plant is $13.50 per hour. Workers receive a meager $0.25 per hour raise every six months, with a ceiling wage of $15 per hour, a poverty wage scale in a state with one of the highest costs of living. Nationally, starting wages for Amazon workers are often only $11-12 per hour.

Another worker told the WSWS, "The most striking thing to me about working here is the incredibly low morale. I've

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worked at other jobs, including at large factories, and I've never seen workers' morale so low. You try to get by and pretend 'it's another day in paradise,' but it's really difficult when everyone seems so depressed and angry all the time."

The Tracy fulfillment center opened in October 2013 at the same time as another facility was opened in nearby Stockton, a city devastated by the 2008 financial collapse, which in 2012 became the largest American city to declare bankruptcy, before being surpassed by Detroit the following year.

Amazon has six fulfillment centers in San Bernardino, another major city to declare bankruptcy.

The company apparently targets areas that have been hard hit by deindustrialization, which have an ample supply of unemployed workers who can be exploited for low wages. Cash-strapped states and localities offer the company large tax cuts and other subsidies to "create jobs."

Some of the sites chosen for new fulfillment centers are Livonia, Michigan, western suburb of Detroit, where the warehouse will be built on the location of a former General Motors plant.

Amazon is also slated to open two facilities in Aurora, Illinois, where Caterpillar plans to close a plant later this year, wiping out 800 jobs. The state of Illinois is granting Amazon $12.9 million in corporate tax breaks for these two facilities, and potentially over $100 million for the company's eight total facilities in the state.

There is a deep undercurrent of hostility among Amazon workers toward these brutal working conditions that they face, and a growing sentiment in support of a struggle. In addition to these concerns, Amazon workers at the Tracy, California facility and another warehouse in northern Virginia, just outside of Washington, DC, also spoke to the WSWS about the danger of war, expressing the general antiwar sentiment felt in the majority of the American population.

After learning that Trump had ordered air strikes directly targeting the Syrian government, one worker at the Tracy facility emphatically declared, "Trump is an idiot." Another at the Northern Virginia facility said, "In my opinion, killing is never the way and it is definitely not the way to achieve peace in this world." This worker noted that at a younger age he had been forced to join the US Army, as a means of paying for his school tuition.

An Amazon contractor at the Northern Virginia center said, "There are so many other things the population should be worrying about. The threat of a major war with another nuclear power is something we all should be concerned about, and it should be the media's job to bring something like this to peoples' attention. It seems like it's left up to the socialists to be the ones to bring it up."

While management seeks to silence dissent among Amazon workers there are many Facebook pages and reddit.com posts where workers actively express their opposition. There is a sense that something must be done not only about conditions on the job but the grim prospects an entire generation of young workers is facing, including massive student loan debts, dead-end and low-paying jobs and the danger of war.

Efforts by several trade unions, including the International Association of Machinists, to make inroads among Amazon workers have been rebuffed due to the decades of betrayals by these organizations. Far from improving wages and conditions for warehouse and logistics workers, including at United Parcel Service, the Teamsters and other unions have maintained multi-tiered wage and benefit systems and part-time and precarious employment conditions.

Amazon workers need organization. They do not, however, need organizations that are tied to the big business and the corporate-controlled political parties. The Socialist Equality Party urges Amazon workers to form rank-and-file workplace committees to unite Amazon workers to fight for the right to secure, good-paying and safe jobs. Amazon workers in the US and internationally possess an immense, but, as yet, untapped power, and common industrial action by workers could quickly become a choke point in the global economy.

Fundamentally, the great questions confronting Amazon workers, like all workers in the US and around the world—the immense social inequality, the underlying structure of society, the threat of a nuclear world war—can only be addressed through the building of a mass political movement of the working class against the capitalist system, which enables the few like Bezos to accumulate vast riches by exploiting the collective labor of the working class.

We encourage all Amazon workers to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today. We will do everything in our power to assist workers in establishing lines of communication among Amazon workers throughout the US and internationally, to build rank-and-file committees and elaborate a fighting strategy to defend their interests.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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