

“When they pay a contract worker it’s like they’re giving money to a beggar”

Amazon investing billions in India to extract super profits

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As US-based Amazon online retail giant moves to conquer the Indian market, it has invested 16.8 billion rupees (\$US250 million) in its Indian arm, Amazon Seller Services Pvt Ltd, in a bid to oust its chief Indian rival Flipkart.

With this new infusion, Amazon’s total investment in India crossed the \$2 billion mark, making the company the second largest global investor in India’s digital economy. The first is Japanese-based telecommunications and internet company SoftBank, which has nearly \$4 billion in investments in the country.

After meeting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his US visit, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos tweeted in excitement, “Always impressed, energized by optimism and invention in India. Excited to keep investing and growing.”

Commenting on the recent investment, an Amazon spokesperson gushed, “We remain committed to our India business with a long-term perspective to make e-commerce a habit for Indian customers.” He added, “We are delighted and humbled by the trust from our customers, to lead in India things that matter to our customers in just four years of our business, while continuing to launch innovative India-first initiatives as well as completely new offerings like Prime and Prime video.”

Like other transnational corporations, Amazon hopes to extract super profits by taking advantage of the country’s contract labor system and the government’s ruthless suppression of working-class resistance. Earlier this year, 13 autoworkers at the Maruti Suzuki assembly plant in Manesar, in the giant industrial belt outside of New Dehli, were sentenced to life in prison on trumped up murder charges. The special prosecutor who originally sought the death penalty complained that the Maruti Suzuki workers’ strikes, plant occupations and other militant actions were a “stain on our image” that undermined Prime Minister Modi’s “Make in India” campaign to attract foreign

investment.

A team of reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* and *International Amazon Workers Voice* recently visited the Amazon Transportation Services Pvt Ltd. facility in the Royapettah district of Chennai, a city of 7 million on the Bay of Bengal in eastern India. The reporters spoke with contract workers at the Amazon facility.

Arjun, 45, said, “When I joined the company as a contract worker I was told my daily wage would be 550 rupees (US \$8.50). I don’t have a day off during the week and I am not entitled to festival holidays. It’s sort of like no work, no pay. If I get hurt during my working hours I will have to bear the medical expenses.”

He continued, “I would leave this job if I could get one with higher wages. I don’t have any direct connection with Amazon. I have to talk to my contractor about any problems with pay and I don’t even know how much the contractor gets from the company. There is no definite date for payment so I never know when I’m going to get paid. When they pay a contract worker it’s like they’re giving money to a beggar.

“It’s very difficult to look after my family with my low wages.” Arjun explained that his children are forced to go to poorly funded public schools even though he and other workers would like to send their children to private schools for a better education. “I pay rent for my house and I can’t meet all these expenses,” he said.

“I know Amazon operates in several countries, including Germany, America and Britain, but I had no idea about the conditions of Amazon workers in these countries. I’ve only learned about the conditions and struggles of Amazon workers in different countries by talking to you. I agree all the struggling workers at Amazon should unite and fight for better wages and working conditions.

“As you say it would be good if the workers of the world

unite and fight. I like that concept. But no other parties in this country talk about this program. I don't like any of these parties. Workers need a party like yours."

Arjun denounced Prime Minister Narendra Modi as "a rogue" because Modi "is passing bills against working people." Modi, he said, "cuts subsidies meant for working people. He ignores the plight of the farmers. He is touring the world. How much money did he seize by demonetizing and eliminating 500- and 1,000-rupee currency notes?"

Pushparaj, 55, a contract driver, is paid only 12,000 rupees (US \$186.42) per month. He gets no additional benefits, which only a small number of permanent workers receive.

The worker described his experience following the tragic death of his wife. "My wife used to work as a permanent worker in a private company called Medafom in Chennai. The company was shifted to Chennai's suburb. She died while working in the company, but, so far, the company has not given us any of the benefits she was entitled to, including her Provident Fund (PF) and gratuity.

"When I asked the company to give us the money we were entitled to so I could pay for my daughter's wedding, they refused. I was so angered by company's hostile attitude I rushed to the company gate carrying 5 litres of kerosene and prepared for self-immolation. At that point company officials came running towards me and gave me 10,000 rupees. I was only able to get this pittance because I threatened to kill myself in protest. So far they have not given us my wife's severance package.

"To survive I work at Amazon as a contract worker in very difficult conditions. I don't even have a place to stay, so I sleep on a platform outside the company gate."

Commenting on the role of political parties at the central and state level Pushparaj said, "None of the parties are any good. During former DMK [Tamil Nadu-based bourgeois party] rule, its leader Karunanidhi became notorious for his party's rampant corruption. He made all his family members rich. They have hidden all the wealth they accumulated through corruption.

"But the late Jayalalithaa, [the former chief minister AIADMK, which currently rules Tamil Nadu] was caught red-handed because she was not as efficient as the DMK leaders in hiding the illegal wealth she stole! Both the ruling and opposition parties are corrupt and work for their selfish interests."

Pushparaj scoffed at the Modi-led Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government for boasting about seizing 'black money' (illegally obtained income not declared for tax purposes) and demonetizing smaller currency notes. Modi made opening bank accounts compulsory as well as a mandatory identity card—the Aaddhar card system—to hand out the government's meager

benefits.

"When Tamil Nadu farmers went to capital New Delhi and staged demonstrations to demand loan waivers, Modi never bothered to meet them and address their plights.

"The poor farmers who borrowed from the banks and were unable to repay the loans were humiliated and driven to suicide. But the rich, like Vijay Mallya who borrowed 70 billion rupees from public-sector banks and failed to repay them, were allowed to flee the country and lead an extravagant life style in London.

"Both the state and central governments protect the interests of the rich. I like your party because it fights for the unity of the international working class."

Sukumar, 29, said, "I get a monthly salary of 15,000 rupees (US \$233) and I have been working for this company for the past three months. My driving job is difficult, but they still pay me less. If Amazon, a world-wide company, paid us directly we would get a minimum of 20,000 rupees (US \$310.70). I am living with my parents because that's the only way I can manage with my low salary."

The young worker also expressed his alienation from and contempt for the corporate-controlled political parties. "Don't talk to me about the political parties. Modi's demonetization measure further deteriorated the conditions of poor people. He boasted his government would take away black money from the rich and give it to the poor. But so far, the poor have not benefited at bit."

Mohammed, 26, a driver, said, "I come from an agricultural village in Chengalput, 57 km (35 miles) away from Chennai. In the government-sponsored public work scheme, a person in the village is only paid 150 rupees (US \$2.33). That's why I didn't go for that work. I come from a poor farmer family. The real estate developers are regularly taking over the farm fields to build houses and the farmer's water is diverted. The big land owners are building houses on their farm lands and rent them out to make profits."



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