

Tens of thousands line up at Amazon job fairs as Dow tops 22,000

Eric London
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Two scenes played out across America yesterday, providing a window onto two separate worlds: one occupied by a small, wealthy elite; the other by the working class, who comprise roughly the bottom 90 percent of the population.

Shortly after the opening bell on Wall Street, the Dow Jones industrial average broke the 22,000 mark for the first time in history, a milestone that was greeted with exuberant headlines in the establishment press and made the lead story on NBC's evening news program.

The day before, President Trump tweeted: "Corporations have NEVER made as much money as they are making now," a claim that the fact-checking website Politifact said was partly true, with the caveat that profits were *even higher* under Barack Obama. From the standpoint of America's richest 10 percent, who control over 75 percent of the national wealth, Obama's 2016 claim that "America's pretty darn great right now" is a statement of fact.

At the very moment the Dow crossed the 22,000 threshold, tens of thousands of workers were lined up waiting to apply for jobs with Amazon in the company's nationwide job fair, the largest such event in US history.

If the photos of long lines of job-seeking workers encircling buildings and stretching across parking lots recall scenes from the Great Depression, that's because the conditions of life for masses of working people increasingly resemble the "hungry thirties."

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers representing a diverse cross-section of society—black and white, immigrant and native-born, young and old—who lined up together in the hope of landing an Amazon warehouse job with no pension, barebones health coverage and no guarantee of either an 8-hour day or 40-hour work week.

Workers told the WSWs that Amazon forced them to take an on-site drug test and undergo a background check

just to file an application. Many were disappointed and upset that Amazon refused job offers to those who had not previously filed an application online.

It is a testament to the desperate conditions workers confront that so many thousands view Amazon's average wage of around \$12.50 an hour as a step up from the service industry, where many workers make the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. But the average wage of a US Amazon worker is less than the hourly wage in real terms of a coal miner in 1935, according to the US Labor Department's Handbook of Labor Statistics. Most workers, especially those hired as temps, make even less.

Amazon's job fairs targeted roughly a dozen particularly distressed regions nationwide. Baltimore, Maryland and Buffalo, New York have been hollowed out by decades of job losses and population decline. Suburban areas like Etna, Ohio; Whitestown, Indiana; Romeoville, Illinois; and Hebron, Kentucky are among the most heavily impacted by an opioid crisis that killed roughly 60,000 people last year.

Former industrial hubs like Fall River, Massachusetts; Robbinsville, New Jersey; and Kenosha, Wisconsin were once home to better-paid manufacturing jobs but are now being transformed into industrial parks for low-pay, low-benefit warehouse work, including the 10,000-job Foxconn plant announced last week.

For all their diverse experiences and backgrounds, the challenges workers confront in their daily lives and the concerns they share for the well-being of their families and loved ones are fundamentally the same. They worry about their children facing a lifetime of indebtedness and dead-end jobs, or family members slipping into alcohol or chemical dependency to numb their physical and mental pain. They are burdened by the knowledge that a medical emergency or car trouble could leave them broke.

They wonder how they will come up with the money to care for their aging parents or send their children to

college. They know veterans who went to war and came back traumatized by the horror of imperialist war, only to be denied access to social assistance by the government that sent them there. They know that their friends and coworkers confront the same basic problems.

In the world of the wealthy, seemingly so far away and yet grounded in the same social reality, an entirely different set of concerns predominate, driven by the drive to increase their personal wealth, privilege and social position.

The entire political establishment—including both major parties, the corporate media, the universities, the think tanks and the official state institutions—is single-mindedly focused on addressing the needs of the rich. A section of the upper-middle class, upset over the distribution of resources within the wealthiest 10 percent, indulges in a politics of self-obsession, based on categories of personal racial and gender identity that are employed to gain positions of privilege.

While differences exist between and within different strata of the top 10 percent, bourgeois politics is what Obama called “an intramural scrimmage” between groups who are ultimately “on the same team.” This fact is demonstrated by the areas where the Democrats and Republicans agree: permanent war and massive spending on the military, domestic surveillance, cuts to social programs, tax cuts for the rich, and the militarization of the police to suppress working class resistance.

There is growing opposition in the working class to the increasingly oligarchic character of American society. “I’ve watched a lot of people lose a lot of stuff,” Amazon applicant Eric Childs told a WSWS team in Illinois. Lucinda, a mother of four who also cares for four grandchildren, stood in line to apply for a job in Ohio. She said, “If we spent more on jobs and less on going to war with people we don’t even have anything to do with the country would be much better off.” Andrea, another Ohio job applicant, voiced the frustration many workers felt with both candidates in the 2016 election: “Hillary was all that was wrong with the government,” she said, “and Trump was all that was wrong with society.”

The very economic conditions that cause social inequality also contain its solution. The growth of massive corporations like Amazon, whose supply chains stretch around the world, has united billions of workers internationally in the process of production. New technologies—including mobile phones, the Internet, advanced transportation systems—are revolutionizing social relations and transforming the way in which people

of all races and nationalities interact with one another.

Despite the potential created by the development of man’s productive forces to abolish hunger, poverty and disease, under capitalism these advances become weapons in the hands of the capitalist class. They are used to destroy the jobs and living standards of workers around the world while devastating the environment. At the same time that private ownership of the corporations and banks subordinates the economy to the profit greed of capitalist oligarchs, the conflict between the increasingly integrated character of the world economy and the nation-state system erupts in the form of militarism and war, threatening the planet with nuclear annihilation.

The task of the working class is to free the world’s productive forces from the vice-like grip of the corporations and harness the huge advances in science and technology to meet the needs of the human race.

The corporations must be transformed into public utilities and run democratically by the workers themselves. The wealth of these corporations and that of their CEOs and major stock- and bond-holders must be confiscated and used to guarantee good-paying jobs, universal health care, education, housing, drug rehabilitation programs, pensions and other necessary social services. This requires a political struggle to unite workers internationally, in opposition to the political parties of the capitalist class, for the socialist transformation of the world economy.



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