

Protests against Amazon's bid to seize land from historic African-American community in Virginia

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Since June, the residents of Carver Road, an African-American working class community located in Haymarket, Virginia, have been involved in a struggle to save their homes from corporate giant Amazon and local utility companies. On the basis of eminent domain laws, the corporations are seeking to seize parts of the Carver Road community, formed by freed slaves in the 19th century, in order to build power lines connecting Amazon's nearby Internet data centers.

"The community has been Amazon's extension cord for three years," Elena, a member of the Coalition to Save Prince William County, told the *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV). "There is an unholy alliance between Amazon and Dominion Energy. Amazon gets multimillion-dollar infrastructure from ratepayers and ruins communities like Carver Road.

"I think Amazon is complicit. We have reached out to them for two years demanding that they be engaged and that they compromise with us. They don't mind us paying for the power lines. They want them for free. Bezos is the richest man on the planet. It is a matter of equity and fairness."

Elena noted that the company had stationed armed guards and attack dogs outside of the nearby data center.

The current route, located about an hour's drive west of Washington, DC, was chosen after an environmentally safe but more expensive route was discarded by the local utilities regulator on grounds of costs. A second route, which would have run through the wealthier neighborhood of Somerset Crossing, was rejected after residents with ties to local government petitioned officials to have their community spared.

The \$62 million cost for the project and its attendant

power supply would be passed onto residents and Internet users in the region. In effect, Amazon is charging local residents for the "privilege" of being made homeless.

On Saturday, residents and members of the community rallied near the data center's planned construction site, waving banners denouncing Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and chanting slogans such as "Power to the people, not Bezos!" and "NSA, CIA, go away!"

The IAWV spoke to Nathan Grayson, a resident of Carver Road who will be displaced by the power lines. "They've leveled it out," he said. "They do not care at this given time about anything but getting the building, getting the power connected to it, and making money.

"When this process began in 2015, they didn't come to Carver Road to knock on anyone's doors. I'm the youngest on Carver Road. Every last one of the folks there that are directly impacted... are retired folks.

"My family has been there since the 1900s. Livinia Blackburn Johnson, my great-great grandmother, more than five generations ago, she was the person that was able to purchase the property when slave owners released their slaves and they were given the right to own property in the state of Virginia.

"And now these guys [Amazon and Dominion] are coming through and saying they are going to put up the power lines and are telling me it will still be possible for me to live on that property [with] 230,000 volts running across it. I know for a fact that cell phones don't work up there next to one of those towers. Nothing works once you get next to a 230,000 volt transmission."

Kim, another local resident, said that "all of Carver Road is my family." He continued, "My dad lives

there, and he is 82 years old. He built [the house on Carver Road] when he was 19 years old. If you live near a power line, you'll have health problems."

Amazon, working in collusion with both the local and federal government, is running roughshod over the living standards of workers and the surrounding population. As if returning to feudal times, the company, with billionaire CEO Jeff Bezos at its helm, is upending communities with historic ties to the great democratic gains from the American Civil War.

On August 16, after ongoing protests from the community, Dominion Energy announced it "likely will have no choice" but to select an alternate above-ground route for its power supply. This new route does not end the threat to residents, however, because the hundred-foot power lines would still run through communities in the Haymarket area.

"[Amazon and Dominion] already said that the above-ground route would not... save the Haymarket constituents that are going to have to deal with [the power lines] once they get close to Haymarket," said Grayson. "The ideal thing for this whole situation, which would make it all very simple, is to have an Interstate 66 hybrid route," he explained, which would involve the burying of power lines to avoid the upending of local communities.

"But as of right now," he continued, "this is not found at all [in Amazon/Dominion's submission to the State Corporate Commission]." Grayson added this was because the SCC found that route to be too expensive.

"Why is the SCC trying to dictate what constituents are going to have to pay if all of us as a collective group, [even] the Army Corp. of Engineers, have come in and recommended [the hybrid route]?" Grayson asked.

The SCC's claim to be saving outlays for the benefit of local residents is entirely cynical. The state of Virginia has given out millions in tax breaks and grants allowing multibillion-dollar corporations such as Amazon to transform the state into a preferred business hub. Last March, Virginia's Democratic governor, Terry McAuliffe, hailed the news of a new Amazon distribution center in the state, declaring "Virginia was selected for its business climate, infrastructure, strong workforce, and global competitiveness."

The company was awarded tax breaks and other enticements despite the state of Virginia having a

nearly \$1.5 billion budget shortfall. Last December, McAuliffe outlined a series of items to slash, including public education and state agencies. In addition, McAuliffe removed a request for a continued expansion of Medicaid from next year's budget, noting cynically that "you can always find things to cut."

Speaking of the support given to residents of Carver Road, Grayson added, "We have all different nationalities at the protest today. We all have the same interests. It is an awesome achievement to have all these folks out here trying to protect my house."



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