

Amazon fires New York worker for leading strike demanding safe working conditions

Shuvu Batta
31 March 2020

Late Monday night, online retail giant Amazon fired Chris Smalls, a management assistant at its JFK-8 distribution center in Staten Island, hours after he led a walkout in protest against unsafe working conditions in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Around 50 Amazon workers took part in the job action, holding up signs which read, “Our Health is just as Essential,” in reference to management’s use of the government’s designation of Amazon as “critical infrastructure” to force workers to remain on the job without any meaningful safety measures.

Nationwide, at least ten Amazon facilities have confirmed cases, The strikers said that Amazon was deliberately hiding the real number of those infected. Given COVID-19’s effectiveness of transmission, able to survive in air for up to 3 hours, cardboard for up to 24, and steel and plastics for up to 72, the real number of those infected is likely even higher.

Smalls has already earned widespread support from workers throughout the world. A tweet in support of Smalls has already gained over 3.3K likes, and a petition in his defense, calling for the shutdown of Amazon facilities, has gained over 650 sign-ups as of this writing. Some replies to the tweet express support for unity of all workers, calling for a General Strike.

This strike follows the overnight shutdown of an Amazon facility in Queens by warehouse workers ten days ago. New York City has now emerged as the world’s epicenter of the pandemic, with more than 38,000 cases in New York City proper.

JFK-8, which opened in the fall of 2018 and employs over 4,500 workers, has a dangerous history. Its Occupational Safety and Health Administration(OSHA) Incidence rating was 15.2, higher than the national average of sawmills and steel foundries.

Nationwide, Amazon has forced hundreds of thousands of low-paid warehouse workers to remain on the job without even minimal protection. In a patronizing letter last week to Amazon workers, founder and world’s richest person Jeff Bezos declared that the company’s purchase order for millions of face masks had been delayed and that workers would have to continue on the job without them.

In order to “incentivize” workers to stay on the job, Amazon has raised the hourly wage \$2. The base rate is \$15. Amazon also increased its overtime pay rate from time and a half to double time.

A video posted on Small’s Twitter reveals that JFK-8 workers are dangerously crowded together, increasing the risk of infection. The worker recording the video is heard, in a bit of gallows humor, saying, “Everybody is gonna die.”

As a management assistant, Smalls had direct experience with the spread of disease in the workplace because he was responsible for sending particularly sick workers back home. In an interview with CNBC, Smalls recounted the horrific work conditions which motivated the strike. Smalls recounted his experience in turning away a worker. “Her eyes were bloodshot red. She had a mask on but she looked terrible, I sent her home immediately. A day later she tested positive.”

“The gloves that we have are not retail,” Smalls explained. “These are gloves meant for picking up boxes, these aren’t gloves that protect us from the virus. The masks, we ran out of them a week ago. We, we are not using anything. We’re recycling gloves, we’re recycling masks.” Even doctors and nurses are dealing with a shortage of such essential equipment. Instead, an official advisory from the Centers for Disease Control suggested that doctors wear bandanas. In New York, healthcare workers have taken to wearing

trash bags to protect themselves from infection.

Smalls continued: “We have a third-party company that cleans the building. But they’re human beings as well, they’re scared. Half of them don’t show up. They’ll have twelve people cleaning a 900,000 square foot building. That’s not clean. That’s not sanitizing, that’s not safe.

“You come there sick as a dog. They work you 50 hours a week, for an entire month ... Me, in my case, I bring home \$8-10 thousand [per month], if I do overtime. [But] it’s not worth it, it’s not worth your life.”

In New York City, one of the most expensive cities in the world, \$8,000 per month is quickly eaten up by basic living expenses. The rent for an average 703 sq. ft. apartment is \$4,210, according to RentCafe.

Smalls continued, saying that despite working in conditions where they may die, workers feel that they have no other choice. “They told me, I’ve got bills to pay. I’ve got kids at home... I see people vomiting in the warehouse. They’ll clean it up and put somebody in the same station.”

“These spokespeople, these executives, these VP’s, these regionals, even Jeff Bezos himself, they need to be held accountable,” Smalls concluded.

The experience of Staten Island workers is universal among Amazon workers throughout the country. An Amazon warehouse worker in Oklahoma told the *World Socialist Web Site*:

“My child was tested today and he is running 103 degree fever. He tested negative for the flu and strep throat. I called ERC and told them that my family had to be quarantined until the results came back. I was denied pay because my entire family’s name wasn’t on the note. She told me I didn’t have to quarantine, only my son. My husband and I both work at Amazon. They could care less about our lives. All Jeff Bezos cares about is money.

Amazon “work[s] us to death,” she added. “We have to meet an unreasonable rate, work 10 hour shifts, and are told we get two 30 minute breaks. But we do not [even get that]; we get one 30 minute break and the last break is scan-to-scan. So, if you're on the third or fourth floor after you scan your last item and walk down you only get a 20 minute break before you have to walk back up and scan your item. They treat you horrible. And during peak season we had a man die in front of us

all. It is modern day slavery.”

An Amazon flex driver, in response to the growing wave of strikes among workers employed at Amazon and in the “gig” economy, wrote on Twitter: “I’m an Amazon delivery driver. Drivers and managers are still showing up sick, coughing and driving vans with bald tires. Paid time off requires two weeks notice unless you’re diagnosed but it’s difficult to get tested. Please support the #AmazonStrike and #InstacartStrike.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact