

Detroit Amazon workers strike to demand COVID-19 protection

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The International Amazon Workers Voice wants to hear from you. How is the COVID-19 crisis affecting you and your workplace? Get in touch with us to tell your story.

Amazon workers near Detroit walked out at noon Wednesday to demand protective gear and safe working conditions after at least three of their co-workers tested positive for COVID-19. The workers at the fulfillment center known as DTW1, which is located just north of Detroit Metropolitan Airport in Romulus, Michigan, say management has concealed the extent of the infection at the facility and are demanding its immediate closing and sanitizing.

The number of COVID-19 cases has risen sharply in Detroit, which, along with New York City, has become one of the epicenters of the pandemic in the US. “My safety means a lot more to me and my family than \$17 an hour,” Mario Crippen, a striking worker said on a livestream of the strike. “You cannot replace a life. You can close down and clean this place up.”

Tonya Ramsay said, “I get we’re essential, but our lives are essential as well.” Another worker carried a home-made sign listing the net worth of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and the company’s 2019 profits. “Jeff Bezos is worth \$119 billion. Amazon earned \$239.9 billion in revenue and \$10.1 billion in profits last year. They can afford to close down DTW1 for cleaning.”

With reports that Amazon workers in at least 20 US facilities have tested positive for coronavirus there is a growing movement to demand the closing and sanitizing of facilities and the provision of protective gear, sick leave and hazard pay to workers.

The Detroit walkout follows similar actions by Amazon workers in the New York City boroughs of Staten Island and Queens, a facility in Chicago and other locations. Amazon workers have also struck in Italy and Spain. This week, workers at Instacart and Amazon-owned Whole Foods also struck to demand protective equipment, hazard

pay and the extension of sick leave and testing to workers.

The Detroit workers listed their demands on a leaflet. They include:

- * The shutdown of the facility for professional cleaning with full compensation to workers
- * The implementation of safety measures and the stocking of necessary cleaning supplies
- * Stopping the processing of all non-essential items at DTW1
- * The covering of all medical bills for workers who contract the virus, along with their families
- * The suspension of all write-ups for not reaching quotas, known as “rates,” and the reduction of piece rates “so work can be done safely while social distancing at 6 feet”
- * The full payment of workers who must quarantine due to government mandates, medical issues or to care for loved ones
- * Communicate “transparently” all coronavirus-related issues to workers as soon as the information is known

With more than 250 million people in the US under some sort of lockdown, the delivery of food and other critical items to people who cannot or should not go to stores has become an essential service. But Amazon and other giant corporations have insisted that workers continue to labor in packed warehouses, supermarkets and other workplaces without protective gear.

In a letter to Amazon workers last month, Bezos said they would have to “wait our turn” to receive protective masks due to the nationwide shortage. Of course, Bezos and other corporate oligarchs have access to the best protections and health care. Far from providing these essential workers with the protection and other resources they need, Bezos has victimized strike leaders in an attempt to terrorize other workers into submission.

The company fired Chris Smalls, the organizer of the Staten Island strike, based on the bogus claim that he

violated quarantine restriction after coming into contact with a COVID-19 victim. Responding to the victimization, Detroit strike leader Mario Crippen told the Verge, “If I’m afraid of a little retaliation, then I’m not fighting for nobody. There has to be one person to stand up and fight for what’s right, and that’s got to be me. ... they fired [Smalls] because he was standing up for what’s right. So, once I stand up for what’s right, you fire me, and then let’s say another building does a walkout, you fire them. What are you trying to hide, Amazon? What are you trying to hide?”

The strikes by Amazon, Instacart and Whole Foods workers deserve the support of the entire working class in the United States and internationally. There are millions of workers, including health care, logistics, grocery delivery workers and others, who are willing and able to provide a critical social service in the midst of this crisis. But these workers must be guaranteed living wages and a safe working environment.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to form rank-and-file workplace committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, to oversee working conditions and ensure the defense of workers’ interests. No confidence can be placed in the trade unions, which are arms of corporate management that have done nothing to secure the safety of workers. Rank-and-file committees, working with medical professionals at every workplace, must ensure the safety of all workers.

The SEP insists that rather than being bailed out, the giant banks and corporations like Amazon be turned into publicly owned utilities, democratically controlled by the working class, with no compensation to the billionaire shareholders and corporate executives.

There is no reason why the distribution of food and other essential items should be run by Instacart, Amazon and other private corporations. This vital social service should instead be part of a centrally planned socialist economy, based on addressing social needs, not generating private profit.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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