

Amazon workers in Italy strike over coronavirus cover-up

Worker resistance grows internationally as governments push premature return to work

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There is mounting working class resistance to the efforts of the Trump administration and governments across Europe to push for a premature return to work even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage.

The White House “guidelines” for a return to work are not based on any objective scientific evaluation of the consequences of an early resumption of production. They simply ignore the fact coronavirus-related deaths are increasing, with over 30,000 deaths in the US alone since the beginning of April. Likewise governments in Italy and Spain, countries that have reported the largest number of COVID-19 deaths in Europe, are pushing for a return to work.

These reckless plans are coming into conflict with the determination of workers to protect the health and safety of themselves and their loved ones. Over the past several days strikes and protests have taken place in North America and Europe over lack of elementary safety precautions by employers.

Amazon workers at the fulfillment center in Torrazza Piemonte outside of Turin in Italy have walked out over the cover-up by management of COVID-19 infections. The facility opened in 2018 and employs some 1,200 workers.

Management confirmed that there have been four coronavirus cases at the plant, but it has refused to provide other details. It is the second strike at the fulfillment center. The unions have sought to defuse protests by Italian Amazon workers by refusing to coordinate action at the different fulfillment centers.

In the US, a group of Amazon corporate employees is calling for an “online strike” for April 24 to protest Amazon’s policies, including the firing of Amazon warehouse workers who have spoken out against health and safety practices. The group, Amazon Employees for Climate Justice, has called for workers to take a day off. Amazon has fired two leaders of the group.

On Thursday Amazon stock reached an all time high and extended its year-to-date gain to around 26 percent, further enriching billionaire CEO Jeff Bezos. Amazon’s market capitalization now tops an astronomical \$1.22 trillion.

Steven, an Amazon worker in New Jersey, told the *World*

Socialist Web Site, “Trump is sweating right now because his lobbyist and shareholder friends are pushing him to get us all back ‘to normal’ no matter how premature it is and the risk they are pushing the working class into. It’s once again all about Wall Street. Workers have to realize this and resist believing these politicians; they represent the elites of the private sector, not the working class.

“They have plenty of money for the airlines who rip off people on a daily basis, but not enough for government-run health insurance for everyone. This virus shows it all! It’s criminal!”

A worker at the Ford Kentucky Truck Plant in Louisville said, “Public opinion is shifting. I hope that trend continues. People are becoming aware of how the system isn’t built to serve them, ‘the taxpayers.’ Workers are becoming aware of where they truly stand in the eyes of the major corporations they work for.

“COVID-19 has shed light on inequality that has become commonplace in the United States. The people feel they have no power because we have been pitted against each other.”

While the coronavirus pandemic has initially hit hardest in the US and Europe, infections and deaths are spreading in Latin America. There have been strikes this week by workers at US companies operating south of the US-Mexican border over the lack of response to the spread of COVID-19.

More than a half-dozen workers have died this week at maquiladora factories in northern Mexico, adding to the rising tide of fatalities in Mexico.

On Thursday, hundreds of workers at a Honeywell factory in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico staged a protest demanding the plant be closed as stipulated by federal guidelines banning non-essential production. Workers are demanding full pay during the closure. A worker died of COVID-19 at the plant this week.

“We want them to respect the quarantine,” Honeywell worker Mario Cesar Gonzalez told the *New York Times*. He said the factory makes smoke alarms. “The manager said that we are essential workers. I don’t think an alarm is essential.”

Ciudad Juárez health officials have confirmed 20 COVID-19 deaths in the city, 12 at maquiladora plants. Local public health

officials warned of the potential for an “explosive outbreak.” About half of the more than 300 maquiladora factories in Ciudad Juárez are reportedly still in operation. Mexico has offered no financial support to laid-off workers.

An official for the Mexican state of Chihuahua, where Ciudad Juárez is located, said that 11 workers from the Lear maquiladora have died after testing positive for the coronavirus. Lear confirmed only that “several” workers at its factories, which are now closed, had died of respiratory illness.

In Tijuana, workers at the technology company Poly staged a protest this week after the deaths of two co-workers.

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated not only the bankruptcy of capitalism, but also the reactionary and rotten character of the official unions. In the vast majority of cases, the widening struggles in defense of workers' health and safety have taken place independently of and in opposition to the pro-corporate trade unions. In those few cases where the unions have taken part, their role has been to limit and isolate struggles.

A report on the website Paydayreport.com tracked more than 100 wildcat strikes and protests by workers in the United States since the eruption of the pandemic in early March. Walkouts have embraced wide sectors of workers from health care to food processing, auto production, logistics and grocery.

This week there were several more walkouts. About 40 General Dynamics workers at a naval shipyard operated by BAE Systems in Norfolk, Virginia walked out Tuesday and Wednesday over health and safety conditions. Robert Fentress, age 44, a worker at the BAE shipyard, died April 9, two days after testing positive for the coronavirus.

The leader of the action, an electrician, said he had been unable to get any positive response from management over proposals to defend the health of workers. “Yeah, we’re concerned about you, [they say,] but you know, not really enough to actually do anything.”

In Waterloo, Iowa, hundreds of workers at the Tyson Fresh Meats plant have called in sick this week to protest conditions at the plant. They say that management is covering up cases of COVID-19 and has failed to provide for the safety of employees. The management, determined to maintain production at all costs, is allowing employees it knows are infected to come to work, according to workers at the facility.

On Monday, dozens of workers at the One World Beef plant in Brawley, California refused to come to work over the spread of COVID-19 at the facility. At least one person has tested positive for coronavirus at the plant.

Whole Foods workers plan to hold a nationwide sickout May 1 to protest conditions. COVID-19 infections at the Amazon-owned grocery chain are continuing to rise, and grocery workers across the US are dying. While employees have been deemed “essential,” workers say the company has done little to address safety concerns and has made it difficult to use sick leave. Whole Foods has been enjoying record sales during the

pandemic.

Ten nurses were suspended at the Providence St. Johns Medical Center in Santa Monica, California this week for staging a protest over the failure of management to issue the standard N95 masks. A group of registered nurses who work at Mercy Medical Center Merced, in Merced, California also staged a protest Wednesday over the lack of adequate personal protective equipment.

“Essential workers” at five luxury buildings in North Jersey walked out for 24 hours Thursday over lack of adequate health and safety measures and low pay. On Thursday, doormen at two Manhattan luxury apartments walked out, saying they lacked sick leave and protective gear.

The unification of these struggles and all forms of working class opposition to the capitalist system is a vital question. This will not be carried out by the right-wing, pro-company unions. A new leadership based on a socialist program and perspective is critical to mapping out a way forward.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees in every workplace and factory, democratically controlled by the workers, to fight to defend lives and livelihoods. These committees should demand a halt to all non-essential production and full protection based on world health standards for workers in essential industries such as health care and food production.

All workers must receive full pay and job protection. There must be massive spending on health care, testing and contact tracing to quell the pandemic, with no return to work until conditions are safe.



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