

Build rank-and-file committees at Amazon! For maximum safety, universal testing, and workers' control of production!

Statement by the International Amazon Workers Voice
22 April 2020

Hundreds of Amazon workers called in sick at more than 50 warehouses across the US on Tuesday, in the latest job action by Amazon workers demanding protection from the spread of COVID-19 pandemic.

Over recent weeks, Amazon workers have carried out strikes and walkouts in New York City, Detroit, Chicago and other cities as the contagion spread throughout 130 warehouses, infecting more than 75 workers and killing at least one worker in Hawthorne, California. This is part of an international movement by Amazon workers, which has included strikes in Italy, Spain and France.

The issues facing Amazon workers are common to all workers. Since the beginning of March, there have been over 100 wildcat strikes and other job actions by workers in the US, including health care, public transit and sanitation, auto industry, meatpacking, supermarket and food delivery workers.

These workers, like Amazon workers, are demanding the shutdown of nonessential industries and services and the payment of lost income to affected workers, along with the testing, protective equipment and sanitary measures needed to guarantee a safe working environment for those workers deemed essential. The universal demand everywhere is that workers' lives must not be sacrificed for corporate profit.

Amazon is controlled by the world's richest man, Jeff Bezos. While the company has seen a huge increase in business—leading to another \$24 billion being added to Bezos' private fortune—it has done nothing to protect the lives of Amazon workers.

From the beginning of the pandemic, it was clear that management expected its 750,000 workers to remain at their stations and work until they got sick, after which they would simply be replaced. Only after Amazon workers began taking matters in their own hands, did the company announce that it would implement new safety measures. But these are wholly inadequate and largely for public relations purposes.

Amazon workers continue to report a lack of masks and other protective gear (PPE), inadequate sanitary supplies, and inconsistent and ineffective social distancing measures. Despite being promised two weeks paid leave if they got sick, many quarantined workers report that they still have not been paid. Workers who fall ill also report delays and obstacles in obtaining tests.

Management systematically refuses to provide information to workers as to the number of cases in their respective warehouses, and the discovery by workers of a confirmed case has frequently triggered walkouts and demonstrations.

Now Amazon has unveiled a plan to install thermal cameras in the warehouses, ostensibly to detect workers with fevers. Since people

who are infected but asymptomatic play a significant role in spreading the virus, this cannot be regarded as an effective countermeasure. Once a worker's fever is detected on a thermal camera, it is already too late for that worker and for the hundreds of workers who were in contact with that person over the preceding days and weeks.

Now workers report that the "social distancing" rules in the warehouses are being used to bully and harass workers who speak out. The company's real attitude is summed up by its decision to fire several prominent employees who had spoken out against the corporation's practices, organized strikes and circulated online petitions demanding safe conditions.

What must be done

The *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV), produced by the *World Socialist Web Site*, urges Amazon workers to immediately form rank-and-file committees in every fulfillment center and office, to take forward the fight for safe working conditions and living wages.

Workers should hold online meetings to establish these committees, discuss and formulate their demands and elect the most trusted and militant workers as their leaders to fight for these demands. These committees must be democratically controlled by the ranks and all leaders subject to immediate recall.

Rank-and-file committees must demand the immediate closure of all facilities with workers who develop symptoms or test positive, a halt to nonessential distribution, free and systematic testing for all, and no work without adequate PPE and sanitation supplies. All workers affected by shutdowns or illnesses must receive full pay and fully covered medical care.

Workers' committees can develop further appropriate health and safety protocols in collaboration with medical professionals. Workers' committees can exert control over the conditions of work, abolishing the hated quota and rate system, and demand the reinstatement of workers who have been unfairly terminated.

These committees in each Amazon facility must establish lines of communication with workers in other facilities, and reach out to workers throughout the logistics industry, including workers at UPS, FedEx and the US Postal Service, all of whom are facing unsafe conditions and a relentless attack on their jobs and living standards.

The role of the unions

In response to the rebellions by workers at the Amazon warehouses, a whole number of unions and Democratic Party politicians have claimed they support Amazon workers. On April 1, leaders of several major unions published an open letter to CEO Jeff Bezos encouraging the billionaire to make changes to the company's COVID-19 policies and practices, implement some minor adjustments to benefits, and reinstate the fired Amazon worker Christian Smalls.

Workers need organization to fight a giant and politically connected corporation like Amazon. But the unions long ago abandoned any of the most basic functions with which they were once associated: uniting workers, improving wages and working conditions, addressing workers' grievances, opposing layoffs, and defending workers against victimization.

If the Teamsters, the UFCW or any other unions "organize" Amazon, it will not be to fight the giant corporation but to smother the opposition of workers and establish a business relationship with Amazon, which will allow the unions to collect millions of dollars in union dues from workers' paychecks, while doing the bidding of the corporation.

Nothing has shown the real character of the unions more than their response to the pandemic.

The Teamsters union has kept UPS workers on the job despite coworkers falling ill and dying. President Trump has picked Teamsters President James P. Hoffa to sit on a government board with Bezos and hundreds of other corporate executives, aimed at "reopening the economy" and forcing workers back to work even though this threatens to produce a second wave of the pandemic and tens of thousands of more deaths.

Where corporations were forced to close unsafe facilities, it was entirely due to the actions of rank-and-file workers in *opposition* to the unions. This includes autoworkers in Michigan and Ohio who revolted against the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, whose top officials have been indicted for taking bribes from the corporations. Up until then the UAW refused to close the plants, leading to the deaths of 23 Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers.

Meatpacking workers have also rebelled against the UFCW, which has kept meatpacking and grocery workers on the job despite thousands of infections and the deaths of at least 50 workers.

This is part of an international process. Last week, hundreds of Mexican workers in the border towns of Ciudad Juarez, Matamoros, Tijuana, Mexicali and Reynosa walked out in defiance of the unions after several workers died of COVID-19.

What the unions are doing now is only an extension of what they have been doing for the last four decades.

Amazon workers are being told that their brothers and sisters at UPS are "better off" because they have a union. But in 2018, the Teamsters imposed a sell-out five-year contract on more than 250,000 UPS workers, even after a majority of workers voted to reject the contract. The agreement maintains poverty wages for thousands of part-time workers, and workers especially hated the creation of a hybrid second-tier category of drivers who are paid less.

The betrayal by the unions is not simply due to the corruption and cowardice of their high-paid leaders like Hoffa, who made \$409,000 last year. It flows from the unions' defense of the capitalist system and virulent opposition to any action by the working class that challenges the control of the giant industries and society's wealth by a

handful of billionaires. In addition, the unions are nationally based and hostile to any struggle to unite Amazon and other workers across national borders.

Rank-and-file committees and the fight for socialism

Amazon workers need real organizations of struggle: rank-and-file workplace committees to fight for their basic rights to health, safety, and life in the midst of the pandemic.

The more workers assert their *own* social rights, the more they will come into a direct conflict with the capitalist oligarchs like Bezos and other wealthy shareholders who will insist that they have exclusive "right" to dispense with their factories and warehouses as they see fit and to control the billions in profits produced by the working class.

That is why the struggle of Amazon workers and all workers is above all a political struggle over what class rules society and how the wealth is distributed. That is why the building of workplace committees must be part of the struggle to build a mass political movement of the working class for socialism.

This means rejecting the phony socialism of Bernie Sanders and similar figures who claim that the Democratic Party—a party of big business and war—can be turned into a party for working people. After attracting workers and youth with his talk of "political revolution" against the "billionaire class," Sanders is now demanding they support Joseph Biden, a long-time stooge for big business.

Amazon and all the logistics companies must be transformed into public utilities, collectively owned and democratically controlled by the workers themselves. The whole logistics chain must be used for the benefit of society, opening the way for the free distribution of tests, protective gear, medicines, and food to the population.

The private fortunes of Bezos and the other billionaires must be confiscated and used to save lives and guarantee a good standard of living to all those being hit by the pandemic.

The IAWV, together with the *World Socialist Web Site*, urges Amazon workers to take up the fight to build independent rank-and-file committees and advance socialist policies in their warehouses around the globe. The fight of the working class to make its own voice heard is increasingly a matter of life or death for humanity. Amazon workers will play an essential role in that fight.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)