

# Democrats and unions seek to suppress resistance by Amazon workers

Shuvu Batta  
13 May 2020

On May 5, an Amazon worker in the New York JFK-8 facility was reported to have died from COVID-19. To date, at least 5 Amazon workers have died of the virus, and over 75 percent of facilities are confirmed to have had cases of infection.

The rising death toll and mounting number of infections are an unanswerable indictment of the trillion-dollar international conglomerate, which kept workers at their stations from the start of the pandemic with minimal or nonexistent safety precautions while sitting on a cash hoard of tens of billions of dollars.

Amazon, Instacart, Target and Walmart workers are on the front lines of the pandemic, risking infection and death every day that they show up for work. Under these conditions, workers are being pushed toward struggle, which necessitates organizing within their workplaces to fight for basic self-defense for themselves and their families.

Seeking to head off and contain these struggles in their early stages, the Democratic Party, trade unions and their affiliates have embarked on a major campaign among “essential” workers, a major component of which was the much-hyped “May Day Strike” earlier this month.

The more information comes to light about this dubious event, the more it is clear that this “strike” was a publicity stunt from start to finish. It was not the result of any meeting, discussion or vote among any substantial section of the more than three-quarters of a million Amazon workers worldwide.

The proposal for a “general strike” on May 1 was picked up and circulated on social media by “grassroots” organizations in the orbit of the Democratic Party and promoted by a handful of journalists in late April. Despite lack of evidence that any significant number of actual Amazon workers were committed to participate, major media outlets from *USA Today* to *Fox Business* published the grandiose announcements of a “general strike” uncritically, with the *Intercept* and Bezos-owned *Business Insider* declaring that an “unprecedented” industrial action would take place.

In reality, few Amazon workers were even aware that the “strike” had occurred at all, and even fewer participated. Amazon workers who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* throughout the country, including in New Jersey, Maryland, South Carolina and Texas, almost unanimously reported that they did not know anyone who participated in the walkout at all.

Management was quick to gloat that the turnout was negligible. “The fact is that today the overwhelming majority of our more

than 840,000 employees around the world are at work as usual continuing to support getting people in their communities the items they need during these challenging times,” Amazon spokesman Av Zammit told CNBC on May 1. “While there is tremendous media coverage of today’s protests we see no measurable impact on operations.”

However, the minimal impact on Amazon did not stand in the way of efforts to celebrate and promote this campaign and the forces behind it. Speaking on behalf of the forces behind the May 1 stunt, *Vox* published an article after the strike headlined, “The May Day strike from Amazon, Instacart, and Target workers didn’t stop business. It was still a success.”

If the “strike” did not have any meaningful impact on Amazon’s business operations, how can it be called a success? *Vox* answers by writing that workers allegedly “gained the backing of major political leaders like Sen. Kamala Harris, Sen. Cory Booker, and Sen. Elizabeth Warren, who tweeted in support” and that “Publications like the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and Vice as well as broadcast networks like CNN covered the event, and social media posts about it were shared widely.”

Nine senators, including the three cited above and Senator Bernie Sanders, have also written a letter to Bezos “asking” him to explain why his company fired several employees who were involved in organizing walkouts.

In sum, the “general strike” was a publicity stunt aimed at trying to channel Amazon workers’ opposition into the Democrats’ 2020 election campaigns and behind the political establishment more generally. Currently, all of these senators who are “supporting” Amazon workers are meanwhile supporting the presidential campaign of Joe Biden, a war criminal who presided as vice president over the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom 90 percent of the population to the top 10 percent in American history.

Their tweets in “support” of workers and letter urging the world’s wealthiest man to explain his company’s actions are meaningless, as their entire political careers have been focused on propping up the Democratic Party, which alongside the Republican Party is committed to defending capitalism. Amazon contributes substantial sums to the campaigns of both Democrats and Republicans, and when Amazon tells the politicians to “jump,” as in the case of the recent sordid bidding contest over Amazon’s second headquarters, the Democrats and Republicans stumble over each other to carry out the wishes of the world’s richest man.

These same Democratic Party politicians are backing the campaign to reopen the economy at the cost of countless workers' lives, and have also voted repeatedly in favor of shoveling public money at Wall Street and the rich in the form of massive bailouts during the pandemic.

The fact that the major bourgeois publications enthusiastically covered and celebrated the "strike" should be enough to give any Amazon worker pause. In the promotion of the event, these media outlets generally identified the leaders of the event as *Whole Worker*, Vanessa Bain of Gig Workers Collective, former Amazon manager Christian Smalls, and Willy Solis, a Shipt shopper. The journalists describing these individuals as "leaders" of the strike apparently did not bother to investigate whether these self-proclaimed "leaders" or their demands were supported by any substantial section of actual Amazon workers.

The demand that Amazon workers "unionize" is common to many of the tendencies that attempted to organize the failed May 1 event. *Whole Worker* writes on its website that its goal is to "Unionize Wholefoods Workers." Gig Workers Collective is a newly constituted non-profit organization which writes that it will "take the lead in organizing immediate action" among gig workers employed by rideshare and delivery companies. Smalls is an Amazon manager who organized the walkout of a number of workers at JFK-8 in late March, for which he was fired by Amazon, and he is now cultivating relationships with the unions, the pseudo-left and the Democratic Party.

The May 1 event was vigorously promoted by Athena Coalition, a network of Democratic Party and union-aligned groups that received \$15 million in funding from billionaire George Soros' Open Society Foundation. Among the member organizations is United for Respect, which aims to organize Amazon workers under the leadership of the trade union bureaucracy.

United for Respect is an arm of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) which purports to represent over 1.3 million workers in the United States and Canada in the retail, meatpacking, food processing and manufacturing sectors. The UFCW has already been successful in unionizing Instacart workers in the Chicago suburb of Skokie. They are joined in their efforts to unionize Amazon by the Teamsters union and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

On social media, the event promoters spread flyers which told workers, "Don't cross the picket line!" and called for a "general strike."

"Don't cross the picket line!" in this context is nothing more than a cynical attempt to bully workers into supporting an action that they had no say in, which they had no control over, and which was imposed on them from above.

Meanwhile, the UFCW apparently saw no contradiction between promoting a "general strike" at Amazon and leaving its own workers, who are also working without adequate PPE and in similar conditions, at their stations. The UFCW has recently praised meatpacking companies for "showing real leadership" despite the fact that at least 45 workers have died and over 10,000 have been infected by the coronavirus.

According to *OpenSecrets*, since 2010, the UFCW has spent over \$22 million, money it collected from workers' dues, to

support the Democratic Party. It goes without saying that a great deal of money is involved in the drive to "unionize" Amazon, with millions of dollars of union dues at stake that could be turned over to Democratic Party politicians and activists.

The orientation toward the Democratic Party and reformism is shared by former Amazon VP Tim Bray, who was reported to have resigned over the firings of several Amazon workers. The *New York Times* devoted two articles to his resignation.

In his blog post, Bray states: "If we don't like certain things Amazon is doing, we need to put legal guardrails in place to stop those things. We don't need to invent anything new; a combination of antitrust and living-wage and worker-empowerment legislation, rigorously enforced, offers a clear path forward."

Bray insists that career politicians and courts can pressure Amazon to give up some of its profits and grant workers better work conditions. He writes, "Here are Attorneys-general from 14 states speaking out. Here's the New York State Attorney-general with more detailed complaints. Here's Amazon losing in French courts, twice."

Bray fails to mention that in response to French court rulings that Amazon cease shipment of nonessential items, the company has threatened to shut down all of its facilities in the country, leading to the layoffs of over 10,000 French workers.

The reason that figures and groups like Bray and *Whole Worker* are being promoted by the corporate press is because their orientation to reformism, the unions and the Democratic Party provides a useful counterweight to the efforts of workers to break away from bourgeois politics. The biggest danger, from the standpoint of the capitalist class, is that workers will form their own organizations, assert their own demands, and carry out their own independent actions.

Workers must continue to reject the efforts by the Democratic Party and the unions to hijack their struggles. As an essential, practical matter of self-defense, workers must form workplace committees, democratically controlled by the rank and file, with the purpose of uniting the working class as a whole, which means unity with workers all around the world.

For workers to win a fight against companies like Amazon, which funds numerous politicians and presides over an international corporate empire, they will have to be prepared to take on the entire capitalist system. This requires a determined and patient struggle, guided by a clear socialist perspective, aimed not at "pressuring" conglomerates or capitalist politicians but at bringing to bear workers' own tremendous economic and social power. Under workers' control, businesses like Amazon can be transformed into public utilities, organized not to further enrich the world's richest man but to meet critical needs.



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