

COVID-19: A blessing for Bezos and a nightmare for workers

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Since the coronavirus was first detected in China in December 2019, nearly 20 million people worldwide have become infected and over 700,000 people have died, including 160,000 in the United States. Over 32 million people in the United States are now unemployed, exceeding records which have stood since the Great Depression.

Over that same time, Amazon's value on the stock market has nearly doubled from \$867 billion dollars to \$1.61 trillion. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos' personal net worth has skyrocketed to \$192 billion, including a \$13 billion increase during a single day last month. This points to two interconnected processes: the devastating impact of the virus on human life on the one hand, and the engorging of the super-rich on a massive run-up in share values, driven by a massive government bailout on the other.

The first reported cases of COVID-19 at Amazon were two workers in Milan, Italy, March 1. Two days later workers in Seattle, Washington, tested positive for the virus. As time elapsed, the virus spread, infecting more and more Amazon workers, with confirmed cases in Germany, Spain, France, Poland, USA, etc.

Amazon, which utilizes state-of-the-art warehouse robots and surveillance technology, gave its workers surgical masks and gloves which were often recycled as "protection" from COVID-19. Warehouses were not disinfected properly, non-essential items were being shipped, workers worked in cramped conditions; inevitably, many began to show up sick.

The anger bubbling up among Amazon workers could no longer be contained and a wave of strikes washed over warehouses and delivery stations around the world in late March and April. Here is an incomplete list:

- March 17: Workers begin strike at Amazon's Castel San Giovanni Warehouse in Italy

- March 18: Workers begin walkout at Amazon Piacenza Warehouse in Milan, Italy
- March 18: 250-300 workers in Saran, France
- March 30: 300 workers near Florence, Italy
- March 30: Strike in JFK8 in New York City and delivery station in Chicago
- April 1: DTW1 warehouse in Romulus Michigan
- April 20 - April 26: 300 workers called out in facilities throughout the United States

In March and April there were also strikes by Amazon workers in Spain, but the exact dates are unable to be verified. Strike action was planned by Polish workers, but this was halted by the trade unions. Trade unions for German workers began closed negotiations with Amazon, as tensions began to boil within the rank and file, and in late June more than 2,000 Amazon workers in Germany launched a two-day strike in six facilities.

For all of the Amazon workers, from American workers to workers in Germany, the role of the unions has been to contain their fighting spirit, feed illusions of reform, and ultimately tire out workers into accepting Amazon's terms and conditions of employment. This fact finds clear expression in the "May Day Strike," a protest stunt manufactured by the Democratic Party, the trade unions and corporate news media like the Business Insider.

The suppression of resistance by the trade unions has allowed Amazon to continue to gobble up smaller firms and expand its tentacles all over the world.

The virus has proven to be a great boon for the transnational corporation, accelerating the shift towards online shopping. Amazon dominates this market, accounting for over half of ecommerce sales in the US and 13 percent globally in 2019.

COVID-19 forced its competitors in physical retail to

shut down, and sales for online shopping have sharply increased, with the company recording a 26 percent jump in first quarter revenue.

Amazon used the boost in revenue and demand to hire over 175,000 workers, and increase their investments on building capacity, tools, and services over the course of 2019 and 2020 to over \$30 billion.

Even before the pandemic, the company's logistics arm was set to surpass the combined delivery volume of the United Parcel Service and FedEx by 2022. COVID-19 has accelerated this process by allowing Amazon the opportunity to purchase logistics fleets at fire-sale prices. It acquired 2,300 trucks to launch a new fleet of larger carriers in order to expand its delivery operations, for a total of over 20,000 trucks servicing North America. The company announced the leasing of 12 Boeing 767-300 converted cargo aircraft, bringing its total fleet to 82. It has built dozens of new delivery stations throughout the United States, which are staffed by Amazon "Flex-Drivers," independent contractors akin to Uber drivers, who are responsible for "last-mile delivery," allowing the company to fulfill and expand its free two-day shipping for Amazon Prime members.

In addition, it will add 33 new fulfillment centers this year in the US, increasing storage capacity by more than 35 million cubic feet. An average fulfillment center occupies about 1 million cubic feet, which is the equivalent of the space physically occupied by 600,000 people. A similar expansion will take place worldwide, and the company is rapidly moving forward with the expansion of its grocery business.

As its business expands, Amazon is increasing investment in labor-cutting technologies. Its planned fulfillment center in Sydney, Australia, will be its largest in the world and manned by 2,000 robots, requiring only 800 workers for maintenance. In an average warehouse in North America, about 1,600 workers are needed. Amazon has also acquired the self-driving technology company Zoox for more than \$1.2 billion in June. This comes after the company's investment in electric vehicle startup Rivian and investments in Aurora Innovation, a startup focused on the development of self-driving trucks.

Amazon's immense technical expertise has led it to further integrate itself into the US military and domestic surveillance apparatus, which is offering

lucrative contracts to tech firms as it prepares itself for large-scale war, primarily against China and Russia, and turns towards authoritarian forms of rule to control its domestic population.

According to a report published by the nonprofit Tech Inquiry, since 2016 Amazon has agreed to more than 350 subcontracts from the military and federal enforcement agencies like the FBI and ICE.

The company recently announced the establishment of a space unit called Aerospace and Satellite Solutions, led by former US Air Force Major General Clint Crosier. The unit is responsible for the development of rocket launches, human spaceflight support, robotic systems, mission control operations, space stations, satellite networks and more. Bezos' Blue Origin also has a NASA contract worth \$579 million.

After the 10-year Jedi Contract, which is aimed at overhauling and modernizing the US military's internet infrastructure, was awarded to Microsoft over the frontrunner Amazon, a federal judge ordered the halting of this work in February, allowing Amazon time to present its case and potentially win the contract.

While tens of millions became unemployed due to COVID-19, with countless facing evictions and food insecurity, the US state has poured trillions of dollars into Wall Street through the Federal Reserve. Amazon's growth has allowed Bezos' wealth to skyrocket from about \$120 billion in early February to \$190 billion today.

The owners of Amazon have profited immensely during the pandemic on the exploitation of Amazon workers risking their lives. The company has been hiding infections, taking away workers' temporary raises, and using the tens of millions of unemployed workers as justification for getting away with it all.

If you're an Amazon worker and want to share your comments and get in touch with us, please contact the International Amazon Workers Voice today.



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