

Amazon Prime Day: Fabulous wealth for Jeff Bezos, rampant injuries for workers

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If you are an Amazon worker and want to fight back against speedup and the spread of the virus, contact the International Amazon Workers Voice today for assistance in setting up a rank-and-file safety committee at your warehouse.

October 13 and 14 marked Amazon's "Prime Day," a worldwide sales event by the company that sees sharp increases in purchases. Each year, Prime Day is a time of breakneck speedup and forced overtime for Amazon workers.

Amazon started Prime Day in July 2015, as a "celebration" of the company's 20th anniversary. Every subsequent Prime Day has outdone the previous one, with record sales each year for the company. In spite of the general economic collapse brought on by the coronavirus pandemic, Amazon's sales have skyrocketed this year, as a result of the closures of physical storefronts and the shift by consumers towards online purchasing to avoid crowded stores. Jeff Bezos' personal wealth has also skyrocketed to \$200 billion, making him the richest person in human history. According to an estimate by *Business Insider*, Amazon is expected to make \$10 billion from its Prime Day sales this year, compared to \$7.9 billion in 2019.

A major element of Amazon's rise is its use of the latest technologies to enforce breakneck speeds on workers at its warehouses. According to an investigative report by *Reveal*, Amazon fulfillment centers recorded 14,000 serious injuries in 2019. The overall rate of 7.7 injuries per 100 employees was 33 percent larger than in 2016, and nearly double the industry standard.

But on Prime Day, these injuries are even more common. The report showed that the two weeks of Prime Day and Cyber Monday recorded the highest rate of serious injuries in the year. Amazon denies this,

claiming to *Business Insider*: "We know for a fact that recordable incidents do not increase during peak."

Injuries are significantly higher at Amazon warehouses using advanced robotics than at its traditional sites, because the company uses robots to ramp up work rates to a point unsustainable to the human body. Amazon workers are used up until they are either injured or forced to quit, only to be replaced.

According to a worker in Baltimore interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site*, Prime Day has "been like mayhem."

"As you know, the items come to us in pods, which robots carry. Each floor in the facility has between 1,000-1,500 pods full of items." When enough items become displaced from the pods which are transporting them during a rush, it creates obstacles for the robots. "The intersections are blocked," he said. "People are being forced to stand around and wait for their pods to arrive and are getting hit with TOT [Time Off Task], which comes out of their rate."

The worker noted that Amazon had supposedly suspended its rate requirement during the pandemic, but "people are getting fired left and right for failures to make rate." Amazon workers are graded based on "rate," the amount of product they are able to move per hour.

"Today, we had to take 30 minutes from working just to clear the [fulfillment center] floor. There were a team of people, they must have filled up 500 totes full of items that had been knocked out of pods. They all have to be either trashed because they're damaged, or returned back to inventory.

"There's no way to complete these tasks on one shift, so the night crew is coming in and getting pissed off at the day crew, and then the day crew comes in and gets pissed at the night crew."

The precautions Amazon takes for COVID-19 are a “sham,” according to this worker.

“There’s a mile-long line of people lining up to take the self-administered COVID-19 nasal swab tests,” they said. “There’s no social distancing in that line. Amazon doesn’t care about us. I’ve seen social distance teams [two-person groups appointed by the company to make sure workers are observing the 6-foot distancing rule] argue with safety teams, because guys have to work together to lift heavy pallets that the company asks us to do.”

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Amazon has made a host of excuses, including falsely invoking the HIPAA privacy rules, in order to hide details of COVID-19 infections within facilities from workers. In late September, when the virus continued to spread in the aftermath of the government-backed return to work, Amazon finally released infection data which revealed that almost 20,000 US Whole Foods and Amazon employees had contracted COVID-19. It has not released the total number of workers who have died.

Protests and strikes by Amazon workers have taken place around the world, to demand safe working conditions. Following actions by thousands of workers on last year’s Prime Day, this year saw a strike by over 1,500 workers in Germany and small protest actions in the US.

Management at Amazon, terrified of growing workers’ opposition, has brought former National Security Agency chief Keith Alexander onto its board of directors, and hired former government agents to help spy on workers on social media. It has fired workers for speaking out on internal conditions, in an effort to crush dissent.

In countries where Amazon's workforce are in unions, the latter have worked to limit and isolate strikes. The strike in Germany was organized by the union Verdi which has pushed through concession after concession at Amazon and other workplaces for years, including a recent drive to slash the wages of public sector workers. The protests in the US are being organized by trade union front groups like Amazonians United and the Congress of Essential Workers, whose main concern is to bolster the flagging dues base of unions like the Teamsters, which is working hand-in-glove with management at UPS, and keeping workers tied to the Democratic Party.

In response to Prime Day, Senator Bernie Sanders tweeted “On #PrimeDay, let’s not forget. During the pandemic, Jeff Bezos became \$97 billion richer by increasing prices by up to 1,000% on essential items and denying hazard pay and paid sick leave to over 450,000 of his workers. It’s time to break up Amazon and tax the rich.” However, Sanders himself provided political cover for Bezos and Amazon in 2018 by endorsing the company’s sham pay increase to \$15 per hour, which was combined with cuts to benefits.

Prime Day, with the billions earned off the backs of the Amazon workers, is a gross reminder of the injustice of the capitalist system, but it is just a tiny part of the trillions stolen collectively from workers by the capitalist class. While the masses of the world are faced with catastrophe, the capitalist class has been showered by an orgy of profits.

The wealth hoarded by Bezos and the capitalist class must be taken out of their hands and placed at the disposal of meeting social needs. The *World Socialist Web Site* *International Amazon Workers Voice* calls on Amazon workers to form rank-and-file safety committees at Amazon facilities as new organizations of struggle for workers to oppose the speedup and dangerous working conditions at Amazon. If you agree with this article, reach out to us and we will assist you however we can.

“Amazon doesn’t care,” the Baltimore worker concluded. “People are ready to walk out at my facility. The time is ripe for rank-and-file committees.”



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