“They see us as disposable”: New York Amazon delivery driver speaks out

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While Amazon continues to consolidate its domination of online retail, the e-commerce giant has also sought to cut costs by expanding aggressively into the shipping sector, particularly last-mile delivery. Almost overnight, Amazon has built up a massive delivery network which now accounts for two-thirds of its own packages. By next year, analysts project that its parcel volume will overtake traditional logistics firms like UPS and Fedex.

One of the ways which Amazon has rapidly built out its network is by franchising out local deliveries to third-party contractors, which it began offering in 2018. Today, a large proportion of Amazon delivery drivers are not Amazon employees, but employees of these local contractors.

Relying on contract drivers has many advantages for Amazon. Under these arrangements, the retail behemoth is not responsible for paying drivers’ wages and benefits. Amazon thus can deny responsibility for poor compensation, poor benefits, and unsafe conditions and work speeds. Amazon also disclaims legal responsibility for enforcing limits on driving time and other labor regulations. It demands superhuman efforts of the drivers while blaming the contractors for the resulting accidents.

Michael, age 22, is a driver for Amazon in Rockland County, New York, just outside New York City. He spoke with the *International Amazon Workers Voice* about the conditions that he faces. He has delivered packages for Amazon since September 2020. He is employed by a third-party logistics provider (3PL), BLMS Logistics, not Amazon. The van is a Budget Rental van.

Compared with the hourly wages at his previous jobs as a bartender and a deliveryman for Uber Eats, Amazon’s $17.50 is the highest. “Basically, I’m there to get money. I don’t really have a friend there and wouldn’t recommend it to someone else. They see us as disposable.”

For the 10 weeks leading up to the holidays, Michael was making an average of 150 stops per day. His record was 172 stops in one day. By comparison, the average UPS driver makes 125 stops per day, according to a 2018 report by Reuters.

A stop might involve the delivery of multiple packages. Drivers are paid for delivering all the packages loaded into their vehicle at the beginning of each shift, not according to the number of hours that it takes to deliver them. If a driver often fails to deliver all of his or her packages, Amazon finds a way to get rid of him or her.

At the start of each shift, drivers must sign in to an app that tracks their movements and penalizes them for speeding. A worker with two infractions is fired. “If you underperform, they get rid of you. During the holidays, they had 50 to 60 people, and if you were on standby, you would still get paid for half a day. But after the holidays, they cut a lot of people.”

After driving for half an hour to get to the three-acre parking lot of the Amazon Distribution Center in Mahwah, New Jersey, where he is assigned a van, Michael often is assigned a delivery route back in Rockland County, close to where he lives. After his shift, he returns the van to Mahwah and drives 30 minutes to get home, averaging 10 hours of driving each day.

“To be honest with you, I’m just putting up with it,” he says, “houses that are inaccessible, routes that are through [bad] neighborhoods ... I’ve never been threatened, but a friend of mine did have a racist encounter at a gated community where the guy basically told the company to send out someone who

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wasn’t black.”

A 2016 graduate of Ramapo High School, Michael just completed an associate degree in social sciences and humanities at Rockland Community College in Spring Valley, New York. “I don’t like being in school, but I have a quest for knowledge. Thought I might join the Naval Academy so I could be at sea for four years and get to travel.”

But he is not so sure that he wants to be part of the government, which, to his mind, does not pursue policies that are in everyone’s best interest. “I don’t have faith in this system. People talk about ‘our society,’ but it is not unified. Biden might have been elected, but there is no going back. Too much has changed, too much has been noticed to go back. Especially for my generation, hitting our prime. We need something better than this. ... We are the people who do all the work. It’s not right that the billionaires hold all the money.”

Michael was supportive of the protests last spring over the killing of George Floyd. “The cop was on his neck for eight full minutes while people were watching! It was terrible, inhumane! The world went crazy! It was inspiring that the protests were people of all races, all over the world. But the other side is that the police are still there to do their job. There is a separation between them and the people they are supposed to be protecting.”

Michael supports the campaign by the *World Socialist Web Site* to form rank-and-file committees in workplaces throughout the country. “As a young person, I feel we deserve fair pay, a decent living standard, not to be in so much debt for our education. I want to be able to really live, do something worthwhile that helps people. I want to get more information about these rank-and-file committees.

“Conditions are terrible, no matter where you are working. If you ask me the way forward, first off, we need to be paid more, and all of us—USPS, UPS, FedEx—should be paid the same, since we do the same job. They even deliver a percentage of Amazon packages. Second, we need control over our own safety. As you said, more than 20,000 Amazon workers caught COVID, and an unknown number have died.”

Compared to conditions inside the Amazon Fulfillment Centers, “drivers do pretty well with the protocols, social distancing etc.,” Michael said, “but as conditions go, I don’t feel safe.”

“We take a chance every time we go into the warehouse,” he continued. “Say out of 100 to 150 workers inside, at least 10 to 15 have COVID, but they don’t want anyone to know, because if they did, they’d have to shut down. But they won’t do that, because they’d lose money. There are no off days at Amazon. Even in a snowstorm like today, they text you to pull over for an hour, rather than decide ahead of time to call off the shifts. They make these decisions on a whim.”

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