

Amazon worker dies at Alabama warehouse, one month after retail union's failed organizing drive

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On Thursday, a worker at Amazon's BHM1 fulfillment center (FC) in Bessemer, Alabama collapsed while on the job. According to press reports, the worker was taken to the hospital where he later died.

Amazon, which employs nearly 6,000 workers at the Bessemer site, later told news reporters that the worker, whose name was not given, had suffered a "medical incident" and that the employee had not reported suffering from any preexisting health conditions. The company told *Business Insider* that it would offer grief counseling to all workers at the facility.

"He was working at the station behind me then just disappeared," a worker who witnessed the incident posted on social media. "Next thing I know he's getting carried out on a stretcher." The worker added that they would not reenter the warehouse after witnessing the death. "I cried at work... I can't do Amazon, I tried... Should've let that man go home AND EXCUSE his time the first time he mentioned that he didn't feel well" [emphasis in original].

Workers gave comments of support and solidarity to the worker and his family on Twitter. Many offered accounts of similar incidents and conditions at their own facilities. "There were several people who died at a call center I worked at on the job," a worker named Kevin said. They "weren't found for hours" after they disappeared, he added. "Amazon runs their employees into the ground!" another commenter posted.

One month ago, the BHM1 facility was the site of a massive repudiation of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), which staged a months-long organizing drive at the facility. Only 738 out of the BHM1's 5,800 workers voted "yes" to

accept the RWDSU's representation at the time.

The RWDSU's failure to gain support occurred despite glowing wall-to-wall media coverage in the corporate and "left-wing" press, an unprecedented de facto endorsement by Democratic President of the United States Joseph Biden, as well as a coterie of capitalist politicians, Republican and Democrat alike, who lent their support to the campaign.

In the end, workers turned away from the pro-capitalist organization, which tellingly placed no demands on Amazon as it sought to drum up votes for itself.

The RWDSU has yet to issue its own statement on the incident at BHM1, merely retweeting an article from the corporate press on its social media account. The organization has given far more attention on its Twitter feed to the ongoing effort to appeal last month's election loss at the warehouse than it has to putting forward demands on Amazon for a full accounting of the circumstances behind the worker's death.

The death comes amid reports of rising COVID-19 infections at Amazon facilities. In October, company spokespeople revealed that over 20,000 Amazon associates had been infected in the course of the first 10 months of 2020. That number was given in advance of the winter months, which coincided with both an intensification of work for Amazon and other shipping workers during the holidays as well as a third wave of the pandemic in the US.

In December of 2020, Amazon workers in Baltimore took matters into their own hands and announced the formation of an independent rank-and-file safety committee at the corporation's BWI2 fulfillment

center. The committee, a genuine workers' organization comprised of and led by rank-and-file Amazon workers, has vowed to defend the interests and rights of its fellow Amazonians.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Amazon appeared on lists of the most dangerous occupations in America due to its reckless speedups, defective equipment and lax safety provided for employees.

Last month, Amazon founder and world's richest man Jeff Bezos announced in a final letter to shareholders that the company must "do a better job for our employees." The former CEO declared that in order to make Amazon "Earth's Safest Place to Work," the company should offer enhanced guidelines for workers to avoid injuries caused by repetitive motions.

Such initiatives are window dressing for the company, which produced a record-setting \$23 billion in profit during 2020, to continue its callous exploitation of its workforce amid the pandemic. When asked about Bezos' plan to help workers "use different muscle-tendon groups to decrease repetitive motion," a Baltimore Amazon worker and member of the BWI2 rank-and-file committee explained that the cause of Amazon's record-setting injury level was the "unrealistic" demands the company places on workers.

"[Workers] know that these rates [the number of items a worker is expected to package and ship per minute] are unrealistic," the worker said. Because of this, "trainers are teaching workers shortcuts" in order to make rate. Such methods lead to stress injuries and other debilitating side effects.

The death at BHM1, less than a month after the RWDSU's failed organization drive, demonstrates the need for the building of organizations that genuinely defend the class interests of workers.

Amazonians at Bessemer and elsewhere should contact the International Amazon Workers Voice and seek information on how to build their own independent rank-and-file safety committees to demand genuine safety protocols from Amazon, linking their struggles to other workers in their region and internationally.



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