

Amazon, state officials and unions impose information blackout after Bessemer, Alabama worker's death

Nick Barrickman, Jerry White
12 May 2021

A conspiracy of silence surrounds the May 6 death of an Amazon employee at the BHM1 fulfillment center in Bessemer, Alabama, a week after the story broke. The worker, whose name has not been revealed to the public, reportedly died last Thursday after suffering a “personal medical incident.” The worker was reportedly found unconscious in the bathroom of the BHM1 warehouse and before being transported to a hospital where he was pronounced dead. *Bloomberg* first reported the news and said the worker collapsed at the facility, citing unnamed sources.

Calls placed by the *World Socialist Web Site International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV) with the Jefferson County Coroner's office, the Bessemer police and fire departments as well as the University of Alabama Medical Hospital, the nearest location an injured BHM1 employee would likely be transported, did not uncover any information about the worker's identity or the circumstances of his death.

Calls placed to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) revealed that the company did not inform the agency about the death. Eric Lucero, a public affairs spokesperson for OSHA in Birmingham, Alabama, told the IAWV if a company reports a fatality it depends on the circumstances whether OSHA would carry out an inspection. Another federal Department of Labor spokesperson wrote in an email message, “OSHA does not initiate a fatality inspection in circumstances where the death is the result of natural causes.” In other words, if the death did not physically occur on Amazon's property, then the agency had little cause to challenge the company's version of events.

The agency's records indicate five complaints about the BHM1 facility since it first opened a little over a year ago. The warehouse was last inspected from December 8, 2020 to May 3, 2021. Further information surrounding the complaint was not available absent a Freedom of Information request, a time consuming and resource-intensive process.

Workers at the Bessemer facility have also been kept in the dark, although they are keenly aware of the physical toll of work at the warehouse. A worker at the Bessemer facility who reached out to the IAWV said he did not know any details

about the death but described working there as the “survival of fittest.”

According to the worker, the company's management was “exclusionary. If you're not one of them, they don't care about you.” Describing the wear and tear such a job has on someone with health problems, the worker said, “If you go to work but still have to take insulin or high blood pressure pills, [if you] work 10 to 12 hours, you'll find out where you are and go downhill really quickly.” He added that the behavior of the management was “very young, immature” and could push a person's buttons.

In response to questions from an IAWV reporter about the instances of COVID-19 at the warehouse, which have officially been detected in at least 20,000 Amazon employees, the worker said, “I get those notifications all the time about COVID. They come all day, every day. I'm working there doing the best I can do. I need the money.” The worker asked not to be identified due to fears of company retaliation.

Bessemer Police Lt. Christian Clemons told the IAWV that his department had received a call about a medical emergency at the Bessemer warehouse on May 6 but did not dispatch officers to the scene because no death was reported on the premises. The worker had been transported by ambulance or private vehicle to the nearest hospital, making further police involvement unnecessary, Clemons said. Interestingly, the police department received a previous emergency call involving a “medical incident” from the Amazon facility on April 19, Clemons said, but again the person was either transported by private vehicle or ambulance off the premises, without police involvement. IAWV calls inquiring about these two events to the Bessemer Fire Department, which dispatches EMS ambulances, were not returned.

Bill Yates, the chief deputy coroner in Jefferson County, said that his office had not been notified about the worker's death, and had only learned about from local news reports. “If a doctor diagnosed the cause of death and determined it was due to natural causes,” then it is “completely reasonable” not to contact the coroner's office. Yates stated however that further investigation by his office might be warranted “if law

enforcement believed a delay in getting medical treatment caused the death or if there were complications like a pre-existing heart condition.”

According to a BHM1 worker who alleges to have witnessed the event, Amazon “Should’ve let [the worker] go home and excuse[d] his time the first time he mentioned that he didn’t feel well.” When asked about how this would determine the state’s response, Yates merely suggested the worker’s family “hash it out” with Amazon in a civil court case. Considering the vast resources of the internet retailer, a family’s fight to take the corporation to court and win would be a near impossible feat to accomplish.

In the case of the death of Poushawn Brown, a 38-year old Amazonian who died of mysterious circumstances in January of this year after working in a Northern Virginia Amazon facility’s COVID-19 testing department, the company simply turned its back, leaving the worker’s family to pay the exorbitant costs for an autopsy to determine the cause of death. The cause of her death has still not been determined.

The previous OSHA complaint at the Bessemer facility in December would have placed it during the high point of the “third wave” of COVID-19 infections in the United States. At the time, the United States was recording over 200,000 COVID-19 cases and 3,000 deaths daily. At the same time, Amazon was at peak season in the lead up to the Christmas holiday.

While OSHA and local officials told the IAWV that they had essentially no jurisdiction, inquiries sent by email and phone to the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), which last month failed to win an organizing drive at the facility, went unanswered.

The union, which is currently in the process of appealing its nearly 2-to-1 electoral loss at BHM1, has released no official public statement on the death although it would have far less difficulty in determining the name of the victim and the circumstances of his death. Instead, it has confined itself to posting empty-headed slogans and updates on its appeals to the National Labor Relations Board on the Bessemer vote on its social media pages. On Wednesday, in a particularly insulting post, the RWDSU tweeted that “the union makes us strong [because] we show up for each other.”

In participating in the media blackout on the death in BHM1, the RWDSU is merely reprising its role that it has engaged in elsewhere. In other facilities in where the RWDSU has assumed the role of “bargaining representative” for workers, like the Tyson poultry plant in Camilla, Georgia, it has forced them to remain on the job even as the COVID-19 pandemic has infected and killed its own members.

“The union is a joke,” stated Marc, a leading member of the BWI2 Independent Rank and File Safety Committee in Baltimore, Maryland. “One would think that [a death at a warehouse they were organizing] would be something in their jurisdiction,” he stated ironically. In contrast, an independent

rank-and-file committee would demand that information be released. “We’d make all sorts of demands,” said Marc. Since its formation in December, the BWI2 Rank and File Safety Committee has published statements on the death of Poushawn Brown and placed demands for a full disclosure of information from Amazon relating to the death.

The defeat of the RWDSU was not due to any lack of determination on the part of Amazon workers to organize to defend their basic rights. Instead, it was a top-down operation spearheaded by the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, which is promoting the corporatist unions in the hopes that they can control and suppress the growing opposition of working class, including nearly a million Amazon workers in the US. The Bessemer workers did not reject a fight, they rejected company-controlled unions.

Amazon workers at BHM1 should follow in their footsteps and build their own committee. Starting with what workers need, and not what Jeff Bezos and Amazon claim they can afford, they should organize Amazon workers around a common set of demands. The IAWV propose that these demands include:

- A full investigation, overseen by rank-and-file workers, of the circumstances surrounding the May 6 death at the Bessemer facility
- Workers’ oversight of safety and quotas
- Regular COVID-19 testing
- Complete transparency about infections and deaths
- Abolition of “Time off task” monitoring
- An end to poverty wages

The IAWV is fighting to expand the national and international network of rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and committed to protect workers’ lives and fight for substantial improvements in living standards and working conditions. This struggle is being coordinated through the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

We urge workers at Bessemer and other Amazon facilities to contact us at iawv@wsws.org to provide confidential information about the death in Bessemer and conditions at your warehouse.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact