

# New York Times report reveals Amazon's abuse of its workers during the pandemic

Nick Barrickman

27 June 2021

An investigative report published earlier this month in the *New York Times*, titled “The Amazon That Customers Don’t See,” deals with the policies that guided the company’s response to the onset of the pandemic last year. The June 15 article focuses on the developments at New York City’s Staten Island-based JFK8 fulfillment center, which is the main Amazon warehouse serving the heavily populated tri-state area.

JFK8 is a massive facility, “a warehouse the size of 15 football fields.” During the pandemic, JFK8 set inventory records and shipped millions of items on a weekly basis. However, beyond these top-line statistics, the *Times* authors delve into some of the background events at the facility in the lead up to and during 2020. While the article deals mostly with events at the JFK8 fulfillment center last year, it provides information allowing one to draw broader conclusions about the company’s methods and practices.

The internet commerce giant, founded as an online bookseller in 1994 by Jeffrey Bezos, has grown to encompass a global economic ecosystem. The corporation has a market capitalization of \$1.7 trillion and employs 1.4 million workers globally. According to the *Times*, “[a]bout a million people in the United States, most of them hourly workers, now rely on the company’s wages and benefits” as the company is expecting to become the world’s largest employer in the near future.

Amazon has “pioneered new ways of mass-managing people through technology, relying on a maze of systems that minimized human contact to grow unconstrained,” the publication notes, while ominously adding, “[a]mid the pandemic, the already strained system lurched.”

The company’s methods of managing its workforce, with a heavy reliance on indirect electronic alerts and communications, as well as outright surveillance, are geared toward wringing the most production from the workforce.

As the deadly virus erupted across the US, the *Times* writes, “Amazon took steps unprecedented at the company to offer leniency, but then at times contradicted or ended them.” Workers were “told to take as much unpaid time off as they needed, then [were] hit with mandatory overtime,” the article states.

Amazon introduced relatively minor perks, such as allowing workers to carry phones inside to remain in touch with loved ones, a modest pay increase as well as allowing unlimited unpaid time off (UPT). In addition, it suspended certain policies, such as “productivity feedback” (or disciplining workers for lower productivity). Even so, this information was not adequately

relayed to workers, the *Times* writes, leaving them under the impression that they were still being monitored and would be punished for Time Off Task (TOT).

To compound this contradictory situation, “[w]hen Amazon offered employees flexible personal leaves, the system handling them jammed, issuing a blizzard of job-abandonment notices to workers and sending staff scrambling to save them, according to human resources and warehouse employees.” Needless to say, many workers simply are fired due to lapses in communication.

Even worse things occurred. JFK8, as with other Amazon warehouses, refuses to communicate specific information about the number of COVID-19 cases among its workforce. Workers regularly receive generic text alerts informing them that an unspecified number of “individuals” at their warehouse have tested positive recently. This leaves workers “to worry whether notifications about ‘individuals’ testing positive meant two or 22.”

While Amazon insists that it is relaying all necessary information to public health officials, the *Times* discovered that New York City health records show no reports from JFK8 until November of last year, 11 months after the pandemic was declared. “The company and city officials dispute what happened,” it states glibly.

As a result, cases like that of 42-year-old Alberto Castillo, a Filipino immigrant who, while working mandatory overtime in the spring, had been among the first wave of employees to be infected at JFK8, fell through the cracks of Amazon’s byzantine bureaucracy and city health officials.

Castillo suffered massive irreversible brain damage from his bout with COVID-19. He was left in a vegetative state. Reliant upon short-term disability payments, Castillo’s family began receiving text messages from Amazon representatives inquiring if he would be returning to work soon. The family had to fight repeatedly to keep Castillo’s disability benefits, as the company inexplicably terminated them. “They never called and asked to follow up on how he’s doing,” his wife Ann Castillo told the newspaper.

Finally, as the company instituted minor concessions to workers in the early stages of the pandemic, it began to suffer losses in retail sales. The *Times* writes: “Semi trucks sat at warehouses around the country, without enough workers to unload them. Customers discovered that items the company had deemed nonessential might take a month to arrive—an eternity for a

business that had routinely delivered within two days.”

Faced with a de facto work stoppage at the warehouses, Bezos, like the rest of the corporate and political establishment, sought to coerce workers back to the job by the complete elimination of the unlimited unpaid time-off (UPT) and other benefits they had been receiving since March 2020.

The article cites human resources specialist Paul Stroup, who states he argued against Chief of Operations Dave Clark’s “cold turkey” proposal to get workers back. “Mr. Stroup told Mr. Clark that if employees were brought back gradually, over a month or two, only 5 to 10 percent were projected to stay home and lose their jobs,” the *Times* writes. Demanding workers immediately return would risk losing “20 to 30 percent” of the workforce, Stroup insisted. Clark would eventually opt for exactly this slash and burn approach.

Though the *Times* article does not mention it, Amazon at this time also engaged in a round of false advertising that presented the warehouses as safe refuges from the virus. With the added context provided by the *Times* investigation, it is clear that the company was facing a desperate situation as it lost ground to competitors and its workers refused to enter its facilities.

The cumulative impact of these policies are brought home in the startling fact that Amazon has a turnover of almost three percent of its workforce weekly and *150 percent* of its workforce yearly. “That rate,” the authors note, is “almost double that of the retail and logistics industries [and] has made some executives worry about running out of workers across America.”

Later on, the article states: “In the more remote towns where Amazon based its early U.S. operations, it burned through local labor pools and needed to bus people in.” This astounding fact, which a former Amazon data specialist compares to “using fossil fuels despite climate change,” is written into the philosophy of the company as a deliberate policy.

The article cites a former Amazon vice president, David Niekerk, saying “[CEO] Bezos did not want an entrenched work force, calling it ‘a march to mediocrity.’” According to the *Times*, the company founder “believed that people were inherently lazy,” and thus sought to renew his workforce frequently. Niekerk adds that Bezos views “‘a large, disgruntled’ workforce as a threat,” apparently missing the irony that this is exactly what Amazon has created with its dismissive attitude toward its workers.

The *Times* investigation is a valuable source of information on the inner workings of the retail behemoth. Predictably, the *Times* seeks to paper over the astonishing facts it presents by sowing illusions in Amazon’s reformability, relying on various schemes of both the Democratic Party and the trade unions, as well as the supposed good will of Jeff Bezos himself.

One of the key storylines features Derrick Palmer, whom the article describes as “a strong frontline performer [who] lost trust in the company.” Palmer helped to organize a protest at JFK8 last year as the pandemic first swept through the United States and Amazon workers were forced to work without protective gear.

Palmer is a friend and associate of Chris Smalls, a former Amazon manager who was fired last year after he organized a small protest against the company at JFK8. Since then, Smalls has been boosted by Bernie Sanders and other Democrats and the AFL-

CIO for his support for the trade unions and the Democratic Party. In the process, Smalls and Palmer have staged a number of protest stunts at various warehouses, which draw few Amazon workers but have been widely publicized by the media and the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left apologists for the corporatist trade unions.

The *Times* continues to promote Palmer-Smalls, as well as the failed effort by the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) to gain access to the BHM1 fulfillment center in Bessemer, Alabama.

The publication combines an astonishing number of falsehoods into a single paragraph, asserting: “The Alabama rout [led] to an unexpected moment of recognition by the company. The complaints heard in Bessemer were echoed by workers at multiple warehouses across the country. A new, labor-friendly president was in the White House. The virus had magnified fundamental questions about Amazon’s relationship with its employees, and the reopening economy presented workers with other options—a potential problem for a business whose growth ambitions are larger than ever.”

In fact, Biden, Sanders and the rest of the Democratic Party did not promote the RWDSU because it would advance the struggle of Amazon workers against exploitation by the corporate giant. It would not. Instead, they are promoting the unions because the Democrats want to install a labor police force to contain the opposition of nearly a million Amazon workers and try to block their political radicalization against the capitalist system.

The RWDSU was incapable of generating any support among workers and in the end the top-down campaign involving Biden, Sanders and even Republican Marco Rubio ended in a complete debacle, with less than 13 percent of the workforce voting for the RWDSU.

The *Times*, which is the mouthpiece of the Democratic Party, seeks to promote the lie that Amazon, in league with the Biden administration, will mend its ways. Rather than falling for such nonsense, Amazon workers have to draw the critical lessons of their experiences in the pandemic.

In doing this, they have access to unparalleled resource of the *International Amazon Workers Voice* newsletter, which has published hundreds of articles on Amazon workers’ conditions before and throughout the pandemic. The most far-sighted workers have reached out to the *IAWV* to form a rank and file safety committee in the Baltimore-based BWI2 facility. The committee responds regularly to political events and is point of attraction for Amazon workers seeking to organize a serious struggle against the exploitation of Amazon.

Amazon workers are encouraged to contact the *International Amazon Workers Voice* to begin setting up rank-and-file committees in their own locations.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**