

Ambulances called nearly 1,000 times to Amazon's UK warehouses

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Ambulances have responded 971 times to emergency calls at Amazon's UK "fulfilment centres" since 2018, according to data obtained by the *Mirror* under Freedom of Information (FOI).

Ambulance callouts happened at 24 Amazon warehouses, the *Mirror* reported this week. This included 178 visits to the company's Tilbury warehouse in Essex, the largest in Europe, where an employee died earlier this month.

The newspaper obtained information from nine NHS ambulance trusts. It reported, "Paramedics treated people who had lost consciousness, or were suffering from traumatic injuries, breathing problems and chest or cardiac pain."

Among the medical emergencies were two Amazon employees who were suicidal.

Ahead of this weekend's annual Black Friday discount sales, the newspaper's exposé underscores the brutal exploitation underpinning the company's global dominance and the obscene wealth of its founder Jeff Bezos who is worth £154 billion (\$USD 205.5 billion) according to *Forbes*.

Amazon is expected to take £2 billion in UK sales this weekend and more than \$USD 10 billion in the United States. Its total sales reached £20.63 billion in the UK during 2020, up by more than 50 percent in one year. The company employs 55,000 people in the UK and took on 22,000 extra staff last year as consumers shifted to online retail during the pandemic.

Global Amazon profits hit \$USD 386.6 billion (£289.68 billion) this year, up 38 percent on the previous year. Amazon earned so much that even if all 1.3 million employees were paid a COVID bonus of \$690,000, the company would still be as rich as it was in 2019. The company has a market value of \$1.8 trillion.

The pandemic has vastly accelerated the grotesque inequalities and exploitation inherent in the capitalist

profit system. Workers at Amazon's UK warehouses report they are treated like "slaves and animals", forced to meet impossible pick rates and bullied if they fall behind. A whistleblower from Tilbury told the *Mirror*, "Amazon sees people just like numbers, just like rats."

Testimony from employees to an Amazon Workers' Hotline set up by Unite and reported on Twitter includes:

- "When my second child was born, I requested the time off and was 'ticketed' for being off work."

- "They are checking on you all the time. Once one of managers came to the toilet after me and my friend to check what we were doing there. It was horrible."

- "We have targets of 300 items an hour. The bosses are bullies. The last hour of the shift is 'Power Hour' where if your targets drop it messes up your rate for the whole shift."

- "I had a panic attack at my work station and nearly passed out I, got told that I could only take rest of day off and was to come back to work the next day, there is no mental health support with the Amazon."

- "They have cut the staff by half and the volume has increased during the pandemic. The staff got smaller and smaller, and now we are having to work way more and they have the audacity to say it is for our safety's sake they reduced the number of workers!"

In 2018, the GMB union published results from its own FOI investigation which showed 600 serious medical incidents at 14 Amazon warehouses in just three years. At Rugeley warehouse near Birmingham, there were 115 ambulance callouts, including two for electric shocks and eight for people who had fallen unconscious. Since then, conditions have worsened, with paramedics attending 30 percent more often in the past three years, or 120 additional ambulance visits per year.

Trade unions, charities, lobbyists, NGOs and other representatives of the upper middle class are staging their annual Black Friday protests today. The

#MakeAmazonPay coalition is a top-down operation aimed at suppressing a worldwide rebellion by workers against social inequality and capitalist exploitation. Members of the coalition present themselves as champions of Amazon employees, tapping into workers' desire for globally unified action. But as with the Black Friday sales, it is necessary to look at the fine print.

#MakeAmazonPay reports it is holding "Black Friday actions" in Canada, Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Poland, Germany, Slovakia, Austria, Luxembourg, Spain, Ireland, Turkey, Australia, New Zealand, Bangladesh, India, and Cambodia.

But despite the horrific conditions facing warehouse and delivery workers worldwide, and despite (or rather because of) the awesome potential power of the company's 1.3 million strong workforce, no globally coordinated industrial action has been called. Amazon's Black Friday profits will not be jeopardised. The protests are being widely promoted in the media precisely for this reason, in stark contrast to the media blackout of the explosive strikes by Spanish metal workers in Cadiz.

Token protests being held today in Britain confirm the stage-managed character of the Black Friday campaign. The GMB union announced it will protest alongside the Trades Union Congress, International Transport Federation, War on Want and Labour Behind the Label in the #MakeAmazonPay coalition. Four protests are taking place outside Amazon facilities in Peterborough, Coventry and Ellistown in the East Midlands, with the largest a gathering of 50-100 coalition supporters outside Amazon's HQ in London. No doubt Jeremy Corbyn, that walking talisman against the class struggle, will be on hand to deliver Fabian homilies about the need to protect Amazon workers from rampant profiteering and the importance of Amazon paying taxes.

The #MakeAmazonPay coalition is led by the Progressive International whose founder, political charlatan Yanis Varoufakis, betrayed the Greek working class as Finance Minister in the Syriza government, imposing mass austerity diktats on behalf of the European Union, European Central Bank and NATO. These are people who have nothing to offer the working class except defeat.

The coalition has published a list of "common demands", addressed to Amazon and capitalist governments, calling for "fair pay", for Amazon to pay tax and to compensate for its impact on the planet. It calls on Amazon to begin "sharing power with workers, for instance by welcoming worker representatives elected by

their colleagues in different management levels, and by increasing options for workers to receive not only shares in the corporation, but also voting rights, so that the company moves towards a model of democratic governance."

Politically, its demands promote "unions' rights to promote workers' interests" and "giving unions access to Amazon worksites to inform workers on the benefits of unionization". Its advocacy of the pro-company trade unions is in line with efforts led by United States President Joe Biden, whose Democratic Party administration has publicly encouraged efforts to unionise Amazon warehouses in Alabama, New York and elsewhere.

Union control of Amazon and logistics workers is viewed as a strategic imperative in ruling circles. The financial oligarchy is reliant on the unions' vast apparatus to suppress strikes, discipline the workforce, weed out militants, promote economic nationalism and prevent the emergence of a global mass movement by the working class against capitalism.

To defend themselves, Amazon workers need to rely on their own strength. Independent rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers, must be created at every Amazon facility worldwide, fighting for decent wages, health and safety, a reduction in line speed, reduced hours, and the outlawing of corporate spying and bullying.

A fight by Amazon workers would win enormous sympathy and support among delivery drivers, transport and logistics workers, health workers and in the working class internationally. The demand must be raised for Amazon's transformation into a public utility and the seizure of Bezos's obscene wealth to meet urgent social needs, including the elimination of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges all Amazon workers who agree with this perspective and want to take up a fight to contact the International Amazon Workers Voice (IAWV) newsletter.



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