

New York attorney general belatedly calls for stricter coronavirus protections at Amazon warehouse

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New York state Attorney General Letitia James has asked the New York County State Supreme Court to compel Amazon to institute stronger protections against coronavirus infection at its JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island. Her action came several days after the identification of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, which is more transmissible than previous variants and potentially resistant to the current vaccines.

James also seeks to force Amazon to offer to rehire former JFK8 employee Christian Smalls on an interim basis. Smalls organized a walkout at JFK8 to protest the company's inadequate pandemic safety measures in March 2020. The company fired him on the same day, allegedly for breaking social distancing rules.

The remedy that the government attorneys are belatedly seeking is entirely inadequate and constitutes little more than a spectacle for public consumption. This is, after all, the same state government that unsuccessfully offered Amazon \$3 billion in tax breaks to persuade it to locate its second headquarters in New York City. Former Governor Andrew Cuomo famously offered to change his first name to "Amazon" to secure the company's commitment.

Last year, employee walkouts and other worker actions forced Amazon to implement a few protective half-measures against the coronavirus. But the company has been progressively eliminating these measures since July, following President Joseph Biden's premature announcement of America's "independence" from the pandemic. Amazon is no longer enforcing social distancing or staggering shift and break times. It has lifted occupancy limits on break rooms and reintroduced "stand-up" meetings, in which

many workers gather in a room at the start of a shift. In late October, Amazon stopped requiring vaccinated workers to wear masks.

A recent report by the Strategic Organizing Center (SOC) found that Amazon reported only 27 work-related cases of "respiratory conditions" for all of 2020, even as the company publicly admitted to 20,000 coronavirus cases by October 2020. "This means that Amazon claimed to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration that almost none of the tens of thousands of COVID-19 infections among its workers were work-related, an accomplishment so extraordinary as to be unbelievable," the SOC concluded.

In her motion to seek a preliminary injunction, the attorney general's office asks the court to appoint a monitor to supervise the enactment of safety measures at Amazon's JFK8 warehouse. Amazon is also requested to change its productivity monitoring methods to give workers enough time to practice personal hygiene, cleaning and social distancing.

The attorney general's office also calls for Amazon to enact proper contact tracing and to notify close contacts of workers who have tested positive for the virus. In addition, the motion seeks to require Amazon to adopt protocols for cleaning the facility properly after infected workers have been present.

The request for a preliminary injunction is part of the lawsuit that the attorney general's office filed against Amazon in February over the company's purely cosmetic pandemic safety protocols and its retaliation against employees like Smalls who objected to the dangerous conditions at JFK8. The lawsuit is the product of the office's investigation of Amazon, which began in March 2020.

The attorney general's motion comes 18 months after the first protests about unsafe conditions at Amazon. It also singles out only one warehouse for practices and conditions that are doubtless uniform at Amazon warehouses around the state and country, including New York's other fulfillment centers in Lancaster and Liverpool.

Given these facts, it is clear that the New York attorney general's effort is not designed to address or improve the conditions facing Amazon workers, but to provide a public relations boost to the ongoing effort by Democratic Party-aligned activists to unionize workers at JFK8.

Nationwide, the Democratic Party has mounted a campaign to bolster the credibility of the rotten corporatist trade unions, which has included efforts to bring Amazon workers under the control of one of these unions, the better to suppress mounting militancy and combativeness among this fast-growing and strategically situated section of the working class.

Since his dismissal from Amazon, Smalls has been embraced by Democratic and pseudo-left politicians who seek to portray themselves as advocates of labor. Smalls recently supported the campaign by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) to establish a presence at Amazon's site in Bessemer, Alabama. Workers rejected affiliation with the RWDSU by a margin of more than two to one.

Following this defeat, Smalls founded the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), which he presented as a grassroots organization that is independent from the established trade unions. Smalls' pivot to the ALU implicitly recognizes that the trade unions, which have been betraying their members and collaborating with the companies for decades, are greatly discredited among the working class. Despite these claims of independence, the ALU has welcomed the support of the RWDSU, and Smalls has praised the ongoing efforts of the Teamsters, perhaps the most notorious of all the corrupt bureaucracies, to establish itself at Amazon.

Smalls and his supporters spent six months gathering signatures at JFK8 on a petition to hold a union certification election. Last month, the National Labor Relations Board told the ALU that it had not gathered the minimum number of signatures required to schedule an election. The organizers were forced to withdraw

their petition.

Smalls' attempt to depict the ALU as a novel and militant type of organization notwithstanding, the group's perspective is no different from the established trade unions. Smalls simply proposes to create a new trade union apparatus to serve the same function as the old apparatus that has been so massively discredited.

Attorney General James, for her part, has had a long political career in the Democratic Party. In the 1990s, she held positions supporting various state lawmakers and the state attorney general. In 2003, James was elected to the New York City Council, where she served until 2013. James became public advocate that year and was elected attorney general in 2018. In late October, James announced her intention to run for governor in 2022.

Amazon workers can place no confidence in the cynical and token theatrics of Democratic politicians or their satellites to implement the necessary workplace protections as the Omicron variant spreads. The struggle to secure a safe workplace and stop the spread of COVID-19 requires workers to break from both capitalist parties and the trade unions that collaborate with them.

Amazon workers who want to take up the fight to halt the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace and elsewhere should sign up and participate in the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, launched last month by the *World Socialist Web Site*, and watch the testimony of expert Nicolas Smit regarding the science of masking.



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