“Amazon should absolutely be held liable”: Growing outrage over deaths of workers kept on the job during massive tornado outbreak in US

Chase Lawrence
12 December 2021

There is growing outrage over the fact that workers at two facilities—an Amazon warehouse in Edwardsville, Illinois, and a candle manufacturing plant in Mayfield, Kentucky—were kept on the job over Friday night as a series of devastating tornadoes ripped through six states.

Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear confirmed on Sunday afternoon that the tornado that devastated the state will “ultimately be the longest tornado in certainly US history.” The single tornado tracked more than 220 miles and included in its path the candle factory operated by Mayfield Consumer Products.

There were extensive warnings of the danger days in advance of the tragedy, including from the National Weather Service and local news outlets. Businesses, however, proceeded as usual.

Six people have been confirmed dead at the Amazon warehouse: Etheria S. Hebb, 24; Larry E. Virden, 46; Clayton Lynn Cope, 29; Deandre S. Morrow, 28; Kevin D. Dickey, 62; and Austin J. McEwen, 26.

On Sunday, a spokesman for Mayfield Consumer Products claimed that there are eight confirmed deaths and ten workers still unaccounted for, less than previously feared. The Kentucky governor, however, said that the information was not confirmed, and that it was “way too early” to draw conclusions about the number dead. Beshear has reported that “dozens” of workers at the plant were killed, among at least 70 fatalities throughout the state.

The Mayfield candle factory, which includes Bed, Bath & Beyond as one of its main customers, was operated under sweatshop conditions. A listing on Facebook for full-time positions sets staring pay at $8 an hour, with required 10-to-12-hour shifts. “Mandatory overtime will be required frequently either by extending your shift or working on Friday,” the listing reads. The tornado hit the factory on Friday night.

The candle factory also employed work-release labor, with Graves County Jail telling the *Washington Post* that seven inmates were working at the factory as part of a program to help them get a “fresh start on life” after jail.

The plant that was leveled by the tornado had seven serious and five “other” Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) workplace violations, issued in September 2019, including for “maintenance, safeguards, and operational features for exit routes.” Three of the violations had a monetary penalty attached, which collectively added up to a mere $16,350.

In Edwardsville, Illinois, authorities are switching from rescue to recovery efforts. Edwardsville Fire Chief James Whiteford said that at least 45 Amazon employees survived. The warehouse employed about 190 employees for multiple shifts, but Amazon has hired many low-paid contractors for delivery, and it is not known how many people were in the plant when it was hit. Collinsville Emergency Management Agency stated that people were still trapped inside and described the event as a “mass casualty incident.”

Amazon founder and executive chairman Jeff Bezos, the second richest person in the world, held a lavish party the day after the disaster according to a review of

© World Socialist Web Site

photos from the event by the *Daily Mail*. It is not known if Bezos attended or not, as he was in West Texas on Saturday morning for the launch of the space-tourism BlueOrigin spacecraft.

Bezos posted a photo of himself with crewmembers Saturday, the day after the disaster, captioned, "Happy crew this morning in the training center."

Well after the tragedy, on Saturday evening, in response to growing popular outrage, Bezos tweeted a boilerplate response: "The news from Edwardsville is tragic. We're heartbroken over the loss of our teammates there, and our thoughts and prayers are with their families and loved ones."

In a reply to empty platitudes from Amazon executive Dave Clark Saturday afternoon, Leslie Campbell wrote on Twitter, "I'm an Amazon worker in Kentucky, tornado hit 2 miles from my house and I physically couldn't get to work for my shift. The ERC [Employee Resource Center] team told me that they had no record of tornadoes in Kentucky and couldn't help me with not getting attendance time reduced for today."

A former Amazon worker wrote on Twitter: "The warnings were broadcast well before their shifts. Amazon fired me because I didn't risk my family's only car during a blizzard with near zero visibility at night. Amazon should absolutely be held liable for these worker's deaths."

Clayton Lynn Cope's sister, Rachel Cope, told the *Daily Mail*, "I'd want people to know that he died saving the lives of people in that building because of Amazon's negligence to take the tornado sirens seriously and choosing the productivity of their company over their employees." She added, "My brother is a hero."

In a Facebook post, she wrote, "Everyone knows that this warehouse didn't let everyone get to shelter after he [sic] first siren was heard. Everyone knows that all Amazon cares about is productivity. My brother never would have died if this company actually gave 2 shits about their employees and got them to safety after the storm started to get bad and took it seriously…

"I want them to answer for this, I want this to be a starting point of places taking the lives of their employees seriously and treating them as more than a number. This never would have happened if they cared about lives over productivity and you all know that."

Many workers have compared the disaster in Edwardsville it to a similar occurrence in November 2018, when an Amazon fulfillment center in Baltimore, Maryland, collapsed following severe storms and strong rain, killing two workers of an outside company. The National Weather Service had warned of thunderstorms with gusty winds and heavy rains prior to the incident.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site