

“Amazon won’t let us leave”: Latest US tornado disaster exposes ruling elite’s indifference to life

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“Amazon won’t let us leave” - The final text message sent by Larry Virden to his partner of 13 years, Cherie Jones, before he and five of his coworkers were killed Friday night when a tornado destroyed Amazon’s fulfillment center in Edwardsville, Illinois

The outbreak of tornadoes which ripped through the central United States Friday night into Saturday morning, leaving a path of death and destruction which stretches from Arkansas through Kentucky, has exposed the reality of brutal sweatshop conditions in the heart of America and the naked indifference of the ruling elite to workers’ lives.

The deadliest December tornado outbreak in US history has killed at least 88 people, including children, with many more still missing. The death toll is expected to rise beyond 100 as recovery workers sift through the hundreds of miles of rubble and the critically injured succumb to their wounds. Homes were blown away like little more than pieces of paper as families desperately sheltered in their bathrooms and factories crumpled with workers still inside.

In scenes reminiscent of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire disaster more than a century ago—in which 146 garment workers in New York City were killed because exit doors were locked—workers report that they were trapped in their factories by management as the storms bore down on them.

Hours of advanced storm warnings were dismissed by plant managers at the Amazon fulfillment center in Edwardsville, Illinois and the Mayfield Consumer Products candle factory in Mayfield, Kentucky so they could keep holiday production running full bore with Christmas just two weeks away. Production could not be halted for a single shift to ensure everyone’s safety,

lest it cut into the corporate bottom line.

Workers at the Mayfield plant report that management had threatened to fire anyone who left to seek shelter after multiple tornado warnings were issued for the area. “Even with weather like this, you’re still going to fire me?” 20-year-old worker Evan Johnson asked a manager. Their response, “Yes.” According to Johnson, a roll call was taken to determine if anyone had left.

Forklift operator Mark Saxton, 37, confirmed to NBC News that workers were not given the option to go home but sent back to the line after the first tornado warning. “That’s the thing. We should have been able to leave,” Saxton explained. “The first warning came, and they just had us go in the hallway. After the warning, they had us go back to work. They never offered us to go home.”

When the tornado hit, it leveled the Kentucky candle factory, trapping dozens of workers under the rubble and leaving eight dead. Workers were slaving away for as little as \$8 an hour on 10-12 hour shifts with mandatory overtime. There were also work release prisoners working in the factory under the guard of a deputy who was killed in the collapse.

For its part, Amazon refused to cancel the shift in Edwardsville. As the threat grew more dire, management tried to hustle workers into shelter areas in the interior of the building, but the building was too flimsy to withstand the storm and it collapsed around them, killing six.

As news of the destruction of the Amazon facility in Illinois broke, workers from across the country took to an internal company message board to express their concerns about the lack of safety precautions.

“I have been here six-and-a-half years and have never once been involved in a tornado safety drill on my shift, as well as have not taken part in a fire safety drill in about two years,” one employee wrote, according to The Intercept. “This whole situation has got me thinking our site really needs to revise its safety drills because you never know when disaster and tragedy can strike.”

Amazon has pledged \$1 million to the recovery effort in Edwardsville, equivalent to what founder and executive chairman Jeff Bezos adds to his net worth every 7 minutes. While his workers were being killed in a tornado, Bezos used his weekend to host a lavish party and launch his Blue Origin rocket into space. Bezos reportedly spent \$5.5 billion on his space ship company.

Tornadoes are not a rare or unpredictable phenomenon in the central and southern United States. Meteorologists can predict their formation and path with significant accuracy. In fact, the first tornado warning came from the National Weather Service early Thursday morning and local news stations in St. Louis, Missouri and Paducah, Kentucky were reporting on the possibility of storms as early as Wednesday.

The damage which these storms routinely cause is not inevitable since with the proper material and techniques homes and factories can be built to withstand high winds and debris. Emergency shelters can be built to protect anyone caught in the path of these storms. However, in the pursuit of profit, these more expensive options are often ignored, and cheap housing, such as trailer homes, is allowed to be built in tornado-prone areas.

What this latest disaster—and the repeated deadly impact of tornadoes—exposes is the complete indifference of the American ruling class to the lives of the working class. The homicidal attitude which they hold is that workers are expendable. If they die, they die; another worker can take their place and insurance will cover the rest.

This homicidal indifference to life has been on full display with the policies pursued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic which have resulted in the deaths of more than 800,000 Americans and counting. Employers across the country have sought to cover up outbreaks and suppress information about workers killed. More than 3,600 health care workers were killed

by the virus in the first year of the pandemic alone. Hundreds of teachers and school staff have fallen to the virus as schools have served as superspreader sites across the country. Amazon admitted in October 2020 that 20,000 of its employees had tested positive for COVID-19. The number who have died remains unknown as the company continues to conceal the numbers.

The opposition to lockdowns pursued by President Trump has been continued under President Biden with his “vaccines only” strategy in the face of more infectious variants, resulting in more deaths in the second year of the pandemic than in the first. On average, nearly 1,300 Americans continue to die every day from COVID-19.

Just like the victims of coronavirus, those killed in this weekend’s storms are the victims of social murder. While the aftermath of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire in 1911 sparked a movement for regulations to improve workplace safety, there will be nothing of the sort this time around. Amazon can expect a mere slap-on-the-wrist fine from health and safety regulators, something which executives at the trillion-dollar global corporation already factor in as a cost of doing business.

Workers at Amazon and in every workplace across the country must form rank-and-file safety committees to hold management to account for their crimes and ensure safe working conditions, whether the threat comes from the weather or COVID-19. The wealth of billionaires like Bezos must be expropriated and large corporations like Amazon placed under the democratic control of the working class. If the lives of the working class are to take precedence over profit, the workers themselves must take charge of society and run the economy in accordance with human need.



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