

Amazon workers walk out of facility at Bellmawr, New Jersey

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3 June 2022

Workers at Amazon's DEW8 delivery facility in Bellmawr, New Jersey, walked off the job on the morning of Wednesday, June 1. The strike reportedly involved 10 workers out of a shift of 45, who were joined by other Amazon workers from the region. Representatives of the Communications Workers of America and the Teamsters unions, as well as the Democratic Socialists of America, were also present.

The workers were protesting the planned closure of the Bellmawr location at the end of the month. They reported having initially been told that most of them would be transferred to another facility 11 miles away. Workers complained that the company had not lived up to the promised transfers. Instead, it has now told them that they will have the "opportunity" to "pick up shifts" at more distant locations, some as much as nearly an hour away, at a time of rising fuel prices. There is also no guarantee that workers will be able to retain their current work schedules, imposing an additional hardship for many. Other workers rejected the closure of Bellmawr altogether.

An Amazon spokesperson sought to portray the closure of the Bellmawr facility as a benefit to the workers. "We regularly look at how we can improve the experience for our employees, partners, drivers and customers, and that includes upgrading our facilities." These other locations were portrayed as having "upgraded amenities, including increased on-site parking, larger operational spaces, and better breakrooms with open market vending."

The Bellmawr delivery station, which opened in October 2019, is one of 20 Amazon facilities in New Jersey. The closure comes with Amazon's announcement that it will be cutting its workforce and closing facilities due to a drop in business volume brought on by the developing economic slowdown.

Last month, investors were informed of slowing growth and a weak profit outlook. The company suffered a nearly \$4 billion loss in the first quarter of this year. It recently announced that it will seek to sublet at least 10 million square feet of space and end leases on even more. This includes warehouses in New York, New Jersey, Southern California and Atlanta.

Workers at Bellmawr expressed concerns that the company will use its planned retrenchment and facilities closures to jettison more senior workers in order to further reduce labor costs. And, at the same time, the already brutal working conditions will be intensified on the remaining newer workers to extract the maximum profit to feed its shareholders as economic conditions worsen. Bellmawr workers had already faced intensified exploitation last year when evening shifts were extended from six or eight to 10 hours. Paul Blundell, a Bellmawr worker, told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "A lot of people left because they couldn't do it. Of those of us who stayed, I don't know if I know anybody here who's getting enough sleep."

Another Bellmawr worker, Joseph Calvert, told WBGO that he was being transferred to a facility in Philadelphia, but would not receive an anticipated pay raise he was due after three years with the company since the pay structure there is different than that at Bellmawr. Increasing numbers of workers are likely to face such "musical chairs" treatment.

Amazon already has the highest workforce turnover rate in the industry, approximately 150 percent per year. By slowing the rate of new hires, the company can rapidly reduce the size of its workforce while increasing the already grueling pace of work imposed on its remaining employees, resulting in even greater health and safety impacts on the workforce. This is

already underway.

A study by Rutgers University found that worker injuries at the company's locations in New Jersey rose by 54 percent between 2020 and 2021. Amazon employees suffered a staggering 55 percent of the serious worker injuries reported last year across the entire state. The company was already known for having the highest rate of injuries in the industry nationwide. A union report found that while Amazon employed 33 percent of warehouse workers nationally, it accounted for nearly half of reported injuries in the industry.

The protest at Bellmawr is a sign of growing opposition among Amazon workers as the full impact of the company's brutal attrition and cutback policy takes hold. Workers are clearly willing to fight. Bill Allen, 62, another Bellmawr worker, told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "We're willing to take those consequences because we're mistreated anyway. If you do nothing, you're gonna face the consequences; you do something, you're gonna face consequences."

The Biden administration is attempting to contain this growing opposition by encouraging the development of the trade unions at Amazon. In addition to its support for union campaigns by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union and the Teamsters, Biden also met last month in the White House with Chris Smalls, the head of the allegedly "independent" Amazon Labor Union.

No doubt the unions have some support among Amazon workers who recognize the need for organization in the face of the massive multinational e-commerce giant. But the unions, based on class compromise and acknowledging the supposed "right" of corporations to profits, would quickly establish the same corrupt structures at Amazon that it has in countless other workplaces. They would sign off on job losses only on the condition that such cuts be carried out "jointly" with the collaboration of the union bureaucracy.

Biden's support for the unions at Amazon is informed by his experience as Vice President under Obama, who in 2009 utilized the help of the United Auto Workers to force through massive cuts as part of the bailout of the auto industry. In exchange for its support for job losses and slashing wages in new hires by half, the UAW was given billions of dollars in

corporate stock.

The presence of the CWA and the Teamsters at the New Jersey walkout is significant. In 2018, the Teamsters rammed through a sellout contract at UPS against a majority "no" vote by the membership. Its current president, Sean O'Brien, is a notorious former hatchetman for the previous president James Hoffa Jr., was disciplined in 2014 for threatening violence against his union opponents before suddenly being rechristened falsely last year as an energetic union reformer. The CWA sold out a strike in 2016 by nearly 40,000 East Coast Verizon workers. These are the organizations which are being promoted by Biden and the DSA as champions of American workers.

Amazon workers need organizations, but they need organizations which are controlled by them, not by privileged bureaucracies striving to develop ties with management and the capitalist politicians. This is why the *World Socialist Web Site* encourages Amazon workers to join with workers across the country in forming rank-and-file committees, appealing for the broadest possible support and unity with workers around the country.



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