

Amazon obstructs congressional investigation into deadly Illinois tornado disaster

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The United States House Committee on Oversight and Reform has accused Amazon of obstructing its investigation into the deadly collapse of the company's DLI4 warehouse facility in Edwardsville, Illinois during a massive tornado last December.

From the evening of December 10 into the morning of December 11, enormous tornadoes rampaged from Arkansas to Kentucky, killing over 100 people and leaving hundreds of miles of rubble. It was the deadliest December tornado outbreak in US history.

Amazon's DLI4 warehouse, which employed 190 people, was struck by an EF-3 (winds of 158-206 mph) tornado, which caused the building to cave in on the people inside. Plant managers at the fulfillment center disregarded days of advance storm warnings from local and national weather forecasts and refused to cancel the December 10 evening shift to ensure continued operation during the immensely profitable holiday season.

Warehouse workers and delivery drivers who raised concerns about the storm were threatened with severe reprimand and immediate termination. An Amazon delivery driver who asked permission to seek safety from the impending storm was informed by her boss via text message that such a decision, "will ultimately end with you not having a job come tomorrow morning." Numerous warehouse workers texted family and friends, "Amazon won't let us leave."

As a result of this criminal decision, dozens of workers were injured and six killed as the poorly constructed facility collapsed on top of them. Meanwhile, Amazon founder and executive chairman Jeff Bezos, the world's second richest person worth over \$170 billion, hosted a luxurious party and oversaw the launching of his BlueOrigin spacecraft.

Democratic members of the House Oversight Committee announced at the beginning of April the opening of an investigation into Amazon's "labor

practices." Democratic committee members — including committee chairperson Carolyn Maloney (New York), Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (New York) and Cori Bush (Missouri) — wrote that the inquiry was being undertaken following concerns over "recent reports that Amazon may be putting the health and safety of its workers at risk, including by requiring them to work in dangerous conditions during tornadoes, hurricanes, and other extreme weather."

The House Oversight Committee's initial April 1 letter-of-inquiry to Andy Jassy, President and Chief Executive Officer of Amazon, requested that Amazon provide documents and communications about the tragedy at the DLI4 facility and documents regarding the company's "workplace policies and practices that may have prevented workers from staying safe," and "actions in responding to other severe weather events and natural disasters" since 2017.

The letter stated, "Our investigation into Amazon's response to the events in Edwardsville and other extreme weather events seeks to determine whether Amazon's corporate practices put employee safety first, or whether your company, which now employs nearly one million people in the United States, is merely paying lip service to this principle."

The evidence already available makes the answer to this question crystal clear. More than two months since the launching of the investigation, Amazon has failed to provide any key documents to the House Oversight Committee.

Jassy never publicly responded to the Committee's April 1 letter. Instead, the CEO wrote a letter to shareholders, published April 14, in which he falsely claimed that the company's "injury rates are sometimes misunderstood" and were "about average relative to peers." These are bald-faced lies. Extensive, regular studies have exposed that injury rates at Amazon are far

higher than the national average in the warehouse industry.

In a follow-up letter to Jassy, dated June 1, the House Oversight Committee members write, “Amazon’s failure to provide key documents has obstructed the Committee’s investigation.” They continue, “Nearly seven weeks have passed since the April 2022 deadline, yet Amazon still has not produced any of the key categories of documents identified by Committee staff, let alone the full set of materials the Committee requested.” Amazon has also refused to provide documents from its internal investigation of the DLI4 warehouse disaster, ridiculously citing “work-product and attorney-client privileges.”

Workers have seen this before. It is clear that Amazon is responsible for the deaths and injuries in Illinois. More broadly, it is responsible for the mass injury and deaths of workers at its facilities across the country and internationally. The WSWS has documented countless examples of the company’s ruthlessness in the pursuit of profits.

Instead of penalizing the multi-trillion dollar company for clear obstruction of an official inquiry, the House Oversight Committee demonstrated its toothlessness by simply granting, “as an additional accommodation,” an extension until June 8, 2022, which expired yesterday. The Committee lamely warned that if Amazon fails to meet this new deadline, “it will have no choice but to consider alternative measures to obtain full compliance.” Amazon responded by essentially brushing off the Committee, stating that it has provided over a thousand pages of information and will “continue to work with committee staff on further document production.”

The “alternative measures” pathetically threatened by the House Committee will most likely not go beyond the Committee issuing subpoenas for a hearing on Amazon’s “labor practices.” This hearing, or series of hearings, will feature empty speeches about the moral failures and “unprofessionalism” of Amazon and result in nothing more than a slap on the wrist for the multi-trillion-dollar company.

The entirely avoidable disaster in Illinois and the dismissive response of the corporate giant demonstrate, more broadly, the indifference of the capitalist ruling class to workers’ lives. To them, workers are expendable, worth less than basic machinery and equipment. If one dies, another can quickly be hired to continue production.

Over the last two years, this subordination of life to the production of profit has been on full display with the criminal policies pursued in regards to the COVID-19

pandemic. The ruling class and its political representatives have scrapped all public health measures to stop COVID-19, demanding that the population “learn to live with the virus.”

Amazon continues to conceal the number of infections and deaths among its workforce. However, reports from workers indicate that the virus has taken a heavy toll. Now, the ruling class threatens death and suffering on a far greater scale by recklessly and relentlessly driving towards nuclear world war with Russia and China.

The Democratic Party — the political party of Wall Street spearheading the drive to world war, the pandemic policy of herd immunity, and the cutting of vital social programs and spending — will ultimately do nothing to hold Amazon accountable for its criminality and ensure better working and living conditions for Amazon workers. Neither will the pro-corporate trade unions, which have overseen the decay of working and living conditions for decades and strangled any attempt by workers to fight back.

In late April, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), found that the DLI4 facility “met minimal safety guidelines for storm sheltering,” and announced that it would not hold Amazon liable for the deaths of the six workers in Illinois. OSHA simply recommended that Amazon “voluntarily take the necessary steps to eliminate or materially reduce your employees’ exposure to the risk factors described above.” The agency remains significantly understaffed and underfunded, playing a key role in ensuring the unrestrained criminality of the capitalist class. As of 2021, the agency had issued less than 300 health violations throughout the pandemic for violations of health and safety practices.

Workers must take matters into their own hands by forming independent rank-and-file safety committees and waging a serious struggle against the profit system. A fight for justice for the lives destroyed by capitalism and to prevent these kinds of tragic events requires an independent mobilization against the entire rotten social order.



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