

Amazon air freight workers stage walkout in California's Inland Empire in protest against low wages and lax safety

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Nearly 150 workers at Amazon Air's Regional Air Hub walked off the job Monday in protest against low pay and unsafe working conditions amid high temperatures.

The protest was organized by Inland Empire Amazon Workers United. Temperatures in California's Inland Empire have regularly reached above 100 degrees Fahrenheit throughout the summer. "Working in the heat feels like you are suffocating," stated one freight worker in the group's press release following the walkout. "You need to take breaks and you can overheat really easily. They don't make it easy to take breaks to allow your body to cool down." Other workers complained of heat-related nosebleeds and other ailments.

Workers at the \$200 million facility are also protesting the soaring cost of living. The starting wage at the Regional Air Hub is \$17 an hour, with a ceiling of \$19.25. The group's public statement declares: "The average rent in San Bernardino is \$1,650. With our current starting pay of \$17/hr in a 40 hour work week, we make approximately \$2,200 take home pay – meaning that over 75% of our income is going into rent alone... We can barely afford to live in today's economy."

The group submitted a petition with over 900 signatures, representing over half of the facility's 1,500 employees, calling for wage increases of \$5 and other changes to working conditions during last month's Prime Week, a busy sales event for the company.

Clearly concerned, the company called an "all-hands meeting" earlier this month to address the problem. According to the *Washington Post*, "Managers suggested that workers save money by using public

transit and enrolling in a carpooling benefits program" while also offering minor raises. These actions prompted workers to walk out.

The protest occurred at the commerce giant's Regional Air Hub, which the *Washington Post* called "a uniquely vulnerable point in its logistics network." According to the *Post*, "The facility is a regional hub that funnels customers' orders from across the country to outposts on the West Coast." The location "oversees about seven flights a day to and from the East Coast, Midwest, Texas and the Pacific Northwest."

The protest comes after a series of worker deaths in the logistics industry. Last month, three Amazon workers in one state died. One worker, 42-year-old Rafael Reynaldo Mota Frias, collapsed during Prime Week at the EWR9 warehouse in Carteret, near Staten Island, New York.

The series of seemingly work-related deaths prompted the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to open an investigation into the company. An additional OSHA inspection has been opened into the company's warehouses in multiple states, citing "fraudulent conduct designed to hide injuries from OSHA and others."

The protest comes amid a rapidly escalating growth of the class struggle. It comes immediately on the heels of Amazon worker walkouts in the United Kingdom over meager pay increases of less than 3 percent while Britain's inflation levels are currently in the double digits. Significantly, the British walkouts and facility occupations began in early August, the same time that Amazon managers in San Bernardino nervously called the all-hands meeting offering promises of wage raises to employees.

The San Bernardino region is home to dozens of Amazon and other logistics warehouses. The town was founded in 1851 and the county soon after. It grew in response to the discovery of gold in the region, as well as forming an essential trading hub.

In 1880, the California Southern Railroad, part of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railway, was chartered in the area. The Inland Empire-San Bernardino region today is the 13th largest metropolitan center in the United States and third largest in California.

At the same time, it is one of the poorest metropolitan centers in the country. According to *Best Places*, the city has an average per capita income of \$14,759, which is half of the US average, \$28,555 a year. The primary form of employment is retail, with Amazon being the primary employer.

The Regional Air Hub walkout demonstrates the growing unrest among this critical section of the working class which has been squeezed by the impact of COVID-19, Amazon's abusive management regime, and of rising inflation.

The walkouts further expose the dishonest role of the Democratic Party, which has sought to posture as a friend of workers. Last year, California's Democratic Party-controlled legislature passed a toothless law which banned "distribution centers" from interfering with worker "compliance with meal or rest periods, use of bathroom facilities, including reasonable travel time to and from bathroom facilities, or occupational health and safety laws." As the walkout at the air hub shows, this did not make job conditions any safer at Amazon.

The growth of the class struggle is increasingly bringing workers into conflict with the institutions of the US state, including its bureaucratic trade union allies. West Coast dockworkers have been kept on the job for nearly a month past their contract's expiration with the combined collusion of both the Democratic Biden administration and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union.

At Amazon, the Amazon Labor Union has recently announced a halt to its organizing efforts in the face of electoral setbacks at a number of warehouses and a legal challenge from the company to its election at the JFK8 warehouse. The ALU has increasingly relied on the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy to bolster its support following its election.



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