

Diary of a socialist Amazon worker: “Labor Day 2022—just another day of labor”

Austin Bailey
7 September 2022

The following is the first entry in the series “Diary of a socialist Amazon worker,” a column authored by Austin Bailey, a socialist-minded worker in his twenties, who has followed the World Socialist Web Site since 2016. Bailey writes this column to reach other workers, especially at Amazon, who have burning questions about the realities of working class life. He is always open to listening to the experiences of other workers, Amazon or otherwise, from anywhere in the world. If you wish to have your story shared, Bailey can be contacted at austin.bailey.diary@gmail.com or found on Twitter as @AustinDiary.

September 5, 2022: Labor Day 2022—just another day of labor

One hundred forty years ago, on September 5, 1882, militant workers under the banners of the Central Labor Union (CLU) and the Knights of Labor gathered in New York City for the first time to venerate labor. The explosive growth of American capitalism following the Civil War had catapulted the United States into what would become an unparalleled industrial hegemony. The nation was quite literally built on the blood and suffering of working class men, women and children: As far as American workers were concerned, it was about damned time they were shown respect.

According to William McCabe, grand marshal of the parade, marchers first gathered along the sidewalks of Lower Manhattan and Broadway. Although hundreds were assembled by 10:00 a.m., McCabe noted the small number of workers gathered were hesitant to begin the march without music—never let it be said that workers are ignorant of the proper use of majesty. However, soon Mathew Maguire of the CLU announced 200 workers from the Jewelers Union had arrived with a band. The jewelers turned down Broadway Street playing “When I First Put This Uniform On” from *Patience*, an opera by Gilbert and Sullivan.

With the band as leading escort and undaunted by columns of police and club-wielding officers on horseback surrounding

City Hall, the workers began their prideful march. According to the US Department of Labor, from 1:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m., nearly 25,000 union members and their families filled the streets and celebrated the very first Labor Day.

The *New York Tribune* reported: “The windows and roofs and even the lamp posts and awning frames were occupied by persons anxious to get a good view of the first parade in New York of workmen of all trades united in one organization.”

Four score and sixty years later, Labor Day, once intended to eulogize the sacrifice and productive acuity of working people, is but a hollow shell of what it once was. September 5, 2022 passed as just another calendar day in the year. Well, this isn’t entirely true—every corporate retail chain advertised Labor Day sales that attracted customers, which overwhelmed service workers trying to meet quotas. Hell, Amazon even provided up to 50 percent off on Alexa products, Apple Watches, Galaxy Watches, Fitbits and more.

The majority of my Labor Day was spent laboring at an Amazon warehouse, unloading boxes to crane and conveyor from truck trailers. Despite a series of thunderstorms providing some respite from the worst of the Southern heat, it is still almost 90 degrees outside, and the inside of the trailers are like magnets for hot and humid air. I spend my days at Amazon sweating like a slave; the bandanna I wear to secure my hair is simply saturated in sweat by the end of the workday. I’m forced to wring it out like a face towel at least once a day.

Nearly every coworker shares the same expression of grim resignation that rarely shifts throughout the day.

When I accepted a job at Amazon, it was the first time being introduced to a workplace of such scale. Working alongside hundreds of other workers at the same time introduced me to a new kind of solidarity. Although I’m aware of our shared disdain for the exploitation we collectively face, the foundations for something deeper and more profound lie there. The only time I see anyone stand to their full height is in the few moments they can banter with the person next to them, perhaps relieved to be reminded we are not simply machines.

But such moments never last long because a manager or supervisor is always ready to threaten a write-up. Even if one isn’t in sight, we know our every move is being monitored: Each individual package scanned, how much “idle” time is

taken between boxes, how many carts and crates are filled and moved, etc. An operations manager is always somewhere peering at a screen and taking note of each employee's performance. Frankly, it's dehumanizing to know you're just a set of numbers to a company, but it is doubly so to see people on your "team" sit comfortably and scrutinize us for hours on end when you have to keep moving at all times.

This isn't right. I know it, instinctively, and I am sure other workers know it. So why was this year's Labor Day, a federal holiday, just another day of labor for most people? Shouldn't workers be allowed to celebrate, to rest like the Abrahamic God did on the seventh day? The contrast between the very first Labor Day and today seems void-like. What changed? Why can't I, a worker, ever catch a break? It's said he who does not work shall not eat, but when was it decided this also meant never getting enough sleep?

I can't help but think of the contrast between the unions of the 1880s and today. Then, they were at the very core of the workers' movement. Now the unions are actively working against workers they're supposed to represent. We need change, and it's clear the unions are not stepping up to the plate.

I know some reading this are skeptical. They may ask: With what political authority or experience does this worker make such bold claims? A fair point. The truth is my life (and others in my generation) has been rife with harsh lessons.

I was just a child—around the age kids first begin to retain memories consistently like a movie reel—when the United States launched its "War on Terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq. The world I'd only just become aware of was fraught with crises unfolding in rapid succession. The 2008-09 financial crisis devastated my family in my early formative years. I had not even fully developed a sense of self when NATO's intervention in Libya shook my confidence in the stories of American exceptionalism and moral superiority I grew up with. Perhaps most critically, I've lived a significant chunk of my twenties, a time I think people truly develop into adulthood, witnessing the abandonment of public health during a pandemic and seeing billionaires' fortunes soar while everyone I know is forced to borrow money to make ends meet, as if the only thing keeping the poorest and most vulnerable afloat is a desperate cycle of reciprocity.

Like others, I was disoriented by political whiplash. I was only able to orient myself, to answer my questions, with the help of the *World Socialist Web Site's* socialist perspective.

This year, the WSWS presented Labor Day as a divergent road, a choice between complicity and action. They wrote:

Labor Day 2022 presents the working class with two choices. One is with the AFL-CIO and the Biden administration, which plan to make workers pay for imperialist war, facilitate the spread of the pandemic no

matter the death toll, cause mass layoffs through the hiking of interest rates, and lower wages as the cost of living explodes.

The other path is the development of an independent movement of the working class. This is happening objectively, in the form of the rejection of sellout contracts, the development of an international strike wave, and a growing sense in every workplace that things cannot continue as they are.

We cannot ignore the social reality of the last few years. When COVID-19 first began spreading across the US in 2020, temporary lockdowns and basic health measures were only put in place after rank-and-file autoworkers launched wildcat strikes against the wishes of the union leadership. Our schools were turned into viral incubators with the help of the American Federation of Teachers, which claimed schools could reopen "safely." Most recently, the rail unions intervened to call on the Biden administration to block a strike by rail workers.

The only time anything gets done is when the rank and file take matters into their own hands. I feel workers everywhere should be inspired by the examples being set by their working brothers and sisters who've taken the initiative to make sure their independent voices are heard. We've seen the difference this can make. I'm confident that we can come together on an international scale to solve the most pressing problems of our age.

Please sign up for the International Amazon Workers Voice so that you can follow this column, and email me at austin.bailey.diary@gmail.com if you have a story you want told.

With appreciation,
Austin Bailey



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact