

Diary of a socialist Amazon worker: “Why is it so hot in the warehouses?”

Austin Bailey
18 September 2022

The following is the second 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 18, 2022:

The mercury has not dipped below 90 degrees Fahrenheit (32.2 degrees Celsius) of late, meaning conditions inside the Amazon warehouse where I work have been intolerable, to say the least. There is a real danger of heat stroke. Management displays many advisories to keep hydrated on numerous boards and screens but refuses to air condition the spaces where we work. Everyone working here is acutely aware that, as far as the company is concerned, their personal well-being is secondary to reducing expenses and maximizing profits.

Recently, a co-worker passed out in one of my warehouse’s shipping trailers. I only learned that this had happened after I inquired about her when I noticed she was missing for a few days. While unloading boxes, she evidently became overheated, but the incident was played down and she was sent home quietly. After learning this, I was fairly irate to see management’s “operations” whiteboard claiming that we had gone nearly a month without an accident. With how hot it is, I am sure heat stroke is far more frequent than Amazon wants to let on.

The heat has prompted quite a number of

colorful “it’s hotter than” euphemisms from my co-workers, many of which are not fit for print. They are born of an angry and incredulous indignation and are a way of coping with what everyone knows makes no sense.

Amazon is a corporation valued at over \$1 trillion. Its revenue last year was nearly half \$1 trillion. There is absolutely no reason why the company cannot afford to provide air conditioning, let alone proper air circulation, inside the facilities where the labor of workers like me generates all of this money.

The technology to air condition warehouses has existed for more than a century. The scientific know-how and technology exist. The money is also there. We see it reflected in the huge revenues and profits and the incomes of Amazon’s executives like Bezos, who recently built himself a half-billion-dollar yacht.

Amazon spends vast sums on the tracking and surveillance of workers. How many millions of dollars are spent on the software and infrastructure to try to squeeze every drop of productivity out of our work days, at the expense of our privacy and dignity, scrutinizing every minute of our day looking for “time off tasks”? Amazon obsessively tracks and logs all of our boxes moved, scanned, opened, packed and stowed per hour. Amazon can afford this whole oppressive apparatus, but it cannot be bothered to pay for air conditioning.

To add insult to injury, my warehouse is equipped with massive ceiling fans that are never turned on. These fans—and this is not a joke—are manufactured by “bigassfans.com.” But these “big ass” fans are not turned on in order to save a few pennies on the electricity bill.

Why are warehouses so unbearably hot at Amazon and at other warehouses and workplaces across the

country and around the world? The answer is capitalism. There is no other explanation. The warehouses are kept hot because the less spent on keeping them air conditioned, the more the owners and investors take home in profit.

The capitalist system is also the reason why the warehouses are physically unsafe. Making them safer would lower profits. It is also the reason why no effective COVID countermeasures are in place, and why workers come to work sick (like a co-worker did this week). Preventing COVID from spreading would lower profits. It is the reason why our wages are so low. Raising wages would lower profits.

All of the things we want and need—cooling off our workplaces, making them physically safe, disinfecting them, ending the harassment and surveillance and raising our wages to a livable level—run against the grain of the profit system. This is why I am a socialist and support the organization of workers on a socialist basis to resist and ultimately overturn the capitalist system.

I had the pleasure of attending this week's Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee meeting and hearing powerful testimony from dozens of rail workers and their spouses, too. I heard tales of 80-hour workweeks and inconsistent schedules forcing workers to miss family events and celebrations. Many workers were flustered by the behavior of the rail unions, which are currently working to impede the struggle of workers they claim to represent. Others attempted to remind workers on the call of their collective strength, telling their colleagues nothing is moved without their labor.

Most interestingly, I heard worker after worker ask, with burning insistence, what needs to be done next? Workers are creating and joining independent rank-and-file committees across the globe and making their voices heard, but there's uncertainty about what will happen if workers enter into open struggle with the unions, management, the government, both political parties, and the whole capitalist system. I am no prophet, but history has taught me these things are decided in the course of the struggle, and nothing will be won unless workers put their feet down and say "enough is enough."

I would like to echo a key statement I heard from a rail worker, encouraging his working class brethren to stand firm, to not back down. Without a hint of

trepidation, he urged the hundreds of workers attending to stay the course. Not simply to secure their own demands but also to instill hope in broader sections of the working class. I fully agree with that sentiment, and, as an Amazon worker, I want to express my complete support and solidarity with the workers who attended that meeting and with the resolution they passed.

It's true that there is no shortage of willingness to fight for a better world, but perhaps, just as the railroad workers explained, the only catalyst needed for workers to regain confidence in their social strength is for workers to declare their political independence from the whole capitalist setup and all of the parties and organizations that serve it, forming their own organizations to carry forward that struggle.

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



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