

# Amazon suspends as many as 80 workers who refused to work after a fire in Staten Island warehouse

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As many as 80 workers at Amazon's JFK8 Staten Island warehouse have been suspended after refusing to go to work in the immediate aftermath of a fire inside the facility. Management took the vindictive action after around 100 workers at the facility, including representatives of the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), which won a union election at the facility in April, staged a protest in a management office and demanded to be sent home with pay because of unsafe conditions.

The *International Amazon Workers Voice* calls on all workers to oppose the blatant victimization of these workers and demand their immediate reinstatement with full back pay.

The fire started in a trash compactor inside the building around 4 p.m. on Monday. As shown in several videos taken by warehouse workers and posted on social media, the blaze was significant and not isolated from the rest of the facility; a clear danger to those working inside.

One worker, a stower in the warehouse, told the *World Socialist Web Site* Tuesday that management, responding to the fire alarm, initially told day-shift workers to remain at their work stations. Keeping workers at their stations during an emergency is apparently standard operating procedure at JFK8. The worker told the WSWS that during past fire alarms, despite work stations powering down, management instructed workers to, "Stay at your stations while we investigate."

Workers were eventually told to evacuate the facility after management saw the fire firsthand, and they were sent home with pay. "This was not surprising," one worker told the WSWS. "The day shift was almost over anyway, so they thought they might as well send us home." Workers also reported that they were not allowed to use nearby fire exits but had to use turnstiles to "badge out" before leaving the facility.

Night-shift workers, arriving shortly after the dismissal of the day shift, were directed by warehouse managers to the

facility's cafeteria and told to wait for further instructions. Workers received little to no information about what was happening, reporting that standard safety protocols were not being enforced. Warehouse safety personnel, who are supposed to be stationed at entrances during such an incident, were nowhere to be found. One worker told the WSWS, "We didn't know what was going on. Our representatives should have been here stating what was going on."

After over two hours, management instructed workers that it was safe to go to work, despite the warehouse reportedly still smelling of smoke and other unknown fumes. Several workers are reported to have had trouble breathing and one person was sent to the hospital.

Management's announcement caused an eruption of anger among numerous workers, concerned over their safety and potential health risks. They demanded that all employees be sent home with pay until the facility was entirely safe for workers to return to work. Roughly 100 workers marched to the offices of JFK8 management and confronted warehouse managers.

The protest action eventually broke up with some workers returning to work while others left the facility.

The majority of JFK8 night-shift workers had returned to work before the protest. However, many have indicated strong opposition to Amazon's actions, and several workers said that they were not informed that the protest action was taking place, almost completely unaware of the details.

The next day, dozens of workers who protested discovered that they had been suspended from work. "Smoke and fumes rise," a warehouse worker who participated in the protest action told the WSWS the day after. "They won't be contained to one area. That's dangerous! I have asthma and many of the people working here have pre-existing health issues. It's not just about me, it's about the safety of all of us in this place. I'm not risking my life to make more money for Amazon, no one should. But for that, now I'm

suspended.” Another worker who participated in the protest and was suspended added, “We have the right to do this. They’re violating our right, treating us like some slaves. All they care about are the packages, not us, never us. I went back to work and they still suspended me!”

The multibillion-dollar, multinational corporation is infamous for its horrendous and repressive working conditions, gross exploitation, callous indifference to workers’ lives and retaliation against workers’ opposition. According to a report by the Strategic Organizing Center, in 2021 Amazon reported a staggering 38,334 workplace injuries in the US alone, 7.9 injuries per 100 workers. The injury rate at Amazon’s facilities increased by 20% between 2020 and 2021. In 2021, Amazon employed “one-third of all warehouse workers in the U.S., but it was responsible for nearly one-half (49 percent) of all injuries in the warehouse industry.” The injury rate at Amazon warehouses is reported to be twice as high as the rate at non-Amazon warehouses in the logistics industry.

In the span of just three weeks in July, three workers employed at three different Amazon warehouse facilities in New Jersey died while on the job.

In December of 2021, Amazon’s DLI4 warehouse facility in Edwardsville, Illinois was struck by an EF-3 (winds of 158-206 mph) tornado, which caused the building to collapse. 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 keep operations going during the immensely profitable holiday season. Six workers were killed and dozens injured.

Workers in Illinois who raised concerns about the approaching storm were threatened with severe reprimand and termination.

A former Amazon worker in upstate New York was harassed by Amazon management and eventually fired after publicly protesting against Amazon denying workers time for bathroom breaks during their shifts, another glimpse of the pervasive system of control in Amazon’s warehouses.

Over the last two and a half years, Amazon has forced workers to continue in-person work amidst the raging, deadly and debilitating Coronavirus pandemic. The company admitted that at least 20,000 of its workers were infected in 2020 alone, and it is certain that a substantial number died. Thousands, if not tens of thousands, no doubt are suffering lingering health problems associated with Long Covid. Meanwhile, the corporate behemoth has seen its coffers grow significantly.

However, Amazon is not an evil aberration. It most ruthlessly and openly exemplifies the brutality and callousness of the logistics industry and the entire capitalist

system. No matter the job or employer, workers face unsafe working conditions, brutal exploitation, poverty wages, unbearably long working hours, and deliberate exposure to life-threatening viruses. UPS delivery drivers were forced to work long hours in the summer heat without air conditioning in their trucks. Cab temperatures rose to well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit causing workers to fall ill from the unbearable heat. On June 25, 24-year-old UPS driver Esteban Chavez, Jr. collapsed inside his delivery van while working and died from heatstroke. A UPS driver in New York City was reprimanded for taking a 47-second break to sip water amidst an intense heat wave in July.

Last week grieving families, friends and coworkers buried Ben and Max Morrissey, two brothers who leave behind wives and small children, who were killed in a fire at the British Petroleum-Husky oil refinery in Oregon, Ohio. The brothers, who worked side-by-side at the BP refinery, were killed in what is largely seen as a preventable workplace accident, victims of America’s industrial slaughterhouse that sacrifices hundreds of workers daily to the alter of private profit.

Under the capitalist profit system, workers’ lives are expendable, worth less to the ruling capitalist class than the basic machinery and equipment that workers operate. In the eyes of these parasites, workers have one function, to produce profits. Those who die can be quickly replaced with another.

The fight to ensure workplace safety and against oppression requires that workers take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the Democratic Party and the pro-company trade union apparatus, which have overseen the decay of working and living conditions and sought to strangle every attempt by the working class to take up an effective fight.



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