Diary of a socialist Amazon worker: trials and tribulations with transportation

Austin Bailey
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This essay is part of a series "Diary of a socialist Amazon worker," 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.*

As I was driving to visit an Amazon coworker last month, I was struck with the sudden misfortune of car trouble, a hardship with which tens of millions of workers compelled to get to and fro in poorly designed cities—in vehicles more trouble than they're worth—are all too familiar.

I had only just left home, coming to a stop at an intersection, when a worrisome noise heralding woe made my heart sink into my abdomen. Like an organism in its death throes, my car's systems shut down in succession: as the engine lost power, my car shook and trembled to a stop, the headlights flickered sporadically, the music playing from the radio and the air conditioning keeping the muggy night air at bay ceased. I was stuck, stranded with only silence and growing worry to keep me company.

In that moment, I felt like Atlas, forced to bear the impossible weight of the reality that confronted me. Questions immediately raced through my mind: What was wrong? Would this be an easy fix or a major setback? How much would it cost me? How long would I be without transportation, and how would I get to work? Uber is out of the question (too costly to justify when every penny counts in this economy), but would a fellow Amazon associate lend me a hand?

Just like the overwhelming majority of others around the globe, I am forced to sell my labor to survive: getting to work is a matter of life and death, so this was no mere inconvenience. Every aspect of a workers' life is entirely dependent on clocking in on time for a paycheck. As a result, transportation is of upmost importance.

In fact, as a result of my predicament, I was forced to take a grueling four-hour-long walk home after an already trying day of work at Amazon. Because American cities are generally designed with only cars in mind, little thought is given to pedestrians, forcing me to traverse various terrain that pushed me to my physical limit: fields of tall, overgrown foliage, dried mud in the shape of miniature mountains, stroads where death was a slip away, marshy areas populated with snapping turtles and water moccasins.

At one point, my body began succumbing to exhaustion; I could only move at a snail's place through inertia and determination. Although weary, I mustered the strength necessary to reach a gas station. I shambled inside to buy a drink and chips with what little money I had on me. A brief encounter with the cashier—when my request to use a phone charger so I could try to procure a ride was denied because it was not allowed by store management—provided a sharp reminder of the asociality of the society we live in.

My troubles provided me with the opportunity to reflect on the profound inequity in this world. To the more affluent, a broken car part is comparable to a hangnail, a minor discomfort and a relatively easy fix. After a quick trip to the mechanic, and a few hundred or thousand dollars, they can put it out of their minds (particularly when one can afford insurance that provides loaner vehicles).

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But the worker is immediately confronted by the threat of destitution. Real wages haven't risen for more than four decades, meaning working people are barely scraping by. A sudden expense means choosing what bills to pay and which to put off; it means choosing between food in the fridge or overpriced medications, going with or without.

Meanwhile, the rich and powerful, such as Jeff Bezos, possess a myriad of alternative means of transportation: multiple cars, chauffeurs in limousines, private aircraft, etc. Bezos himself gets from point A to point B via helicopter. In fact, Bezos demanded federal and local authorities approve the construction of an "onsite" helipad at his new headquarters in New York City. One could also point to the egregious use of private planes by socialites.

From this, it is clear there is a large disparity between a worker's and an idler's freedom to move around. Part of this could be solved, or at least some relief provided, if workers' wages actually reflected their productivity or the rapid rise in the cost of living. But individuals like Bezos depend on suppressing wages to keep their profits high.

Speaking of profits, considering the fact that working people produce the obscene wealth the ruling class enjoys, would it not make sense for Amazon to provide transportation for its workers? Or to at least provide some aid in situations like mine? Instead, I face termination of I am not able to clock in to make Amazon money. How does that make sense? Those that produce everything the ruling elite have, their wealth, their privileges, are thrown to the wolves without a care.

Perhaps Amazon's executives are conscious of the disquiet brewing in its workplaces, because many Amazon workers were recently granted a raise, a pitiful one at that. Most workers will see their hourly wages increase by less than a dollar, but this did not stop corporate from singing its own praises, calling the negligent raise "competitive."

I recall the mandatory meeting held where managers announced the change. In a show of needless secrecy, as if to give the affair more relevance, the meeting room's windows were taped with construction paper. We were told that corporate supposedly analyzed our old wages, compared to the pay of other workers in the industry, and decided a raise was in order. It would be more apt to call it a pittance, pocket change really.

Many a coworker of mine openly mocked the event after it was over. The audacity to call a wage increase that would immediately go to taxes, gobbled up by Uncle Sam, competitive! The gall to hold a meeting flush with artificial grandiosity, to force us all to attend, when a simple email or text message would have sufficed!

I asked multiple coworkers what they would see as a fair raise, given the increasing impossibility to afford basic necessities. I did not hear a single positive response to Amazon's "competitive" offer. One thing is clear: if the ruling elite think they can placate workers with scraps from the table, they are sorely mistaken.

With appreciation,
Austin Bailey

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