

# Build a rank-and-file defense campaign for the reinstatement of Staten Island Amazon workers who refused to risk their health for profit!

International Amazon Workers Voice  
9 October 2022

*Send your statement of support for the victimized Amazon workers at JFK8! Fill out the form below and we will publish your statement on the World Socialist Web Site. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

The International Amazon Workers Voice denounces the retaliatory unpaid suspensions of as many as 80 workers who protested when Amazon management tried to make them return to work after a fire at the JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island. We demand their immediate reinstatement with full back pay, and we call on all Amazon workers worldwide to demand their reinstatement and an end to retaliation against workers for exercising their rights.

The victimized Staten Island workers refused to risk inhaling potentially toxic fumes after a fire broke out in the warehouse on October 3. The fire broke out in a trash compactor inside the JFK8 warehouse on Staten Island during the day shift, as documented contemporaneously by numerous workers on social media. Management said, “Stay at your stations while we investigate.”

The day shift workers were eventually permitted to evacuate, but not using the fire exits. Instead, management told workers to “badge out” using the turnstiles. Two hours after the night shift arrived, management told the night shift workers it was safe to go to work, despite the warehouse reportedly still reeking of smoke and other unknown substances.

Despite a number of workers reporting trouble breathing, management insisted that workers return to work. In response, workers organized one of the largest workplace demonstrations at Amazon to date in the

United States. At least 100 workers, including a number of leaders of the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), marched to the management office to demand to be sent home with pay.

While Amazon warehouses are packed with dazzling hi-tech robotics, they are trying to turn back the clock on working conditions more than a hundred years. The fire in Staten Island recalls the horrific Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, in which 146 workers, 122 of them women and children, either burned or fell to their deaths after management locked them inside the eighth and ninth floors of a garment factory.

Over the past year, at least 115 workers in the US were killed in workplace fires and explosions, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The American Burn Association reports that 13 percent of all burn injuries are work-related. But the most common cause of death in a fire, according to the National Fire Protection Association, is not the heat and flames of the fire itself, but the inhalation of smoke and toxic gases, especially in an industrial setting. Beyond the immediate casualties of an industrial fire, the inhalation of toxic gases often manifests years later as cancer or other chronic illness.

“I have asthma and many of the people working here have pre-existing health issues,” said one worker who participated in the protest. “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.”

“We have the right to do this,” says another suspended worker. “They’re violating our rights,

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!”

This worker is absolutely right. Amazon’s actions, moreover, may well have been illegal. Even under notoriously business-friendly US labor law, companies cannot compel employees to work in an unsafe environment. It is management, not the workers, who should be punished.

Amazon has long treated its workers as more expendable than its robots, forcing them to work at unsafe speeds to “make rate,” then kicking them to the curb without workers’ compensation when they get injured. Conditions have only gotten worse during the pandemic, where tens of thousands of workers have fallen ill on the job and an unknown but substantial number have died.

But Amazon is the model for industries everywhere, and “Amazonization” is the new buzzword meaning hi-tech exploitation. Similar measures are being exported to auto plants, to the railroads and other industries. Workers everywhere have the obligation to come to the JFK8 workers’ defense. If this is allowed to stand, they could be the next ones fired for refusing to work in a life-threatening situation!

There is no doubt that Amazon wanted to make an example of the JFK8 workers in particular. The workers at this warehouse have been among the most militant in the country, having organized walkouts in early 2020 against inadequate COVID protections.

Earlier this year, JFK8 workers voted to recognize the ALU as their bargaining agent, the first successful unionization vote at Amazon in the country. Workers were attracted to the upstart ALU because they saw it as a more democratic, militant alternative to the established, bureaucratically-controlled trade unions of the AFL-CIO. But for months, Amazon has defied their democratic decision and have refused to recognize the ALU.

Amazon is terrified this could spread quickly beyond Staten Island—with good reason. The walkout is part of a worldwide movement of working-class opposition, which also includes workers in the auto industry, rail, health care, and education sectors. At Amazon, walkouts over pay and safety were organized by workers at Amazon Air’s Regional Air Hub in California in August, and a protracted series of wildcat

actions by Amazon workers have taken place in the UK.

Workers everywhere, and Amazon workers in particular, regardless of unions status, must organize to defend their brothers and sisters at JFK8. This must be done by building a rank-and-file network of defense committees, in order to publicize information about their case and lay the scaffolding for coordinated joint actions aimed at forcing Amazon to reinstate the JFK8 workers.

This is the task of workers themselves. Nobody else will do it for them. The AFL-CIO bureaucrats, who insincerely seized upon the JFK8 vote earlier this year to try and bolster their own tattered credibility, have not lifted a finger to defend, or even publicize the case of the Staten Island workers. This is because the last thing the well-heeled union officials want is for workers to know about the case and follow the Amazon workers’ example, because that would cut across their conspiracies with the corporations and with Washington to bureaucratically strangle workers’ initiative and enforce pro-management contracts.

A defense campaign can also be the starting point for a broader fight for Amazon workers’ longstanding demands, including: safe and clean workplaces free of deadly viruses and toxic fumes; for an end to management harassment and the oppressive rate system; and for massive pay raises to keep pace with inflation and the rising cost of living.

The WSWS *International Amazon Workers Voice* will do everything it can to assist workers in building a defense campaign. To send a statement of support for the JFK8 workers, and for more information about how to build a rank-and-file defense committee at your workplace, fill out the form below:



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