

Washington D.C. protest honors memory of Amazon COVID tester Poushawn Brown

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Protesters gathered outside the Washington D.C. mansion of Amazon founder and former CEO Jeff Bezos on Thursday to denounce the trillion-dollar corporation for its complicity in the 2021 death of Poushawn Brown, a COVID tester at a Northern Virginia Amazon warehouse.

Brown was a 38-year-old single mother who passed away unexpectedly in her sleep on January 8, 2021. The day before, Brown had complained to her family about suffering from an intense headache. Brown was discovered by family members after trying to sleep it off, having passed away.

The protest was held in front of Bezos' \$23 million mansion in Washington D.C.'s exclusive Kalorama neighborhood. According to *Town and Country* magazine, "The former Textile Museum, located in the hot neighborhood of Kalorama (the Obamas and Jared and Ivanka Kushner are residents)," underwent a \$12 million renovation which began in 2018.

Thursday's protest took place amid a growing movement of Amazon workers against poverty wages and unsafe working conditions. On October 3, at least 100 workers at the JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island marched to the management office to demand to be sent home following a dangerous fire which had broken out in the facility. Amazon responded by suspending dozens of them without pay.

Demonstrations are also being organized during Amazon's Early Access Sale, also referred to as "Prime Day 2," which began this week. These site-wide sales are notorious for the speedup and overwork which is enforced on warehouse workers to compensate for increased sale volumes. On Tuesday, a significant number of workers walked off the job at Amazon's warehouses in Joliet, Illinois and Stone Mountain, Georgia. Workers at Amazon's air hub in San Bernardino are also scheduled to strike Friday. In Germany, Amazon workers are striking nine locations at various times this week.

Poushawn Brown's sister Christina Brown spoke to the crowd. "Today, I'm going to tell you a story about my sister Poushawn and several other workers," she said, adding that she could be emotional when discussing the subject. Christina has been a determined advocate for Poushawn, her baby sister, since the tragedy.

Both Christina and Poushawn began working at the DDC3 Amazon warehouse in 2018. "When I was getting off of work, she'd be going into work," she said.

Brown described the early months of the pandemic. "March 13, 2020, the world stopped. Everything shut down," she said. But "Amazon never closed down. This is when I first heard her start complaining" about safety at the warehouse.

"Everyone was scared... We didn't know anything about COVID. We still don't," she explained. "People still needed to come into work... We didn't have masks, we didn't have gloves, we didn't have hand sanitizer, we didn't have anything."

"The workload got heavier. The rates got higher. She complained to HR, saying that we were fearful and to see if anyone was going to ... close down the warehouse. We needed trays, bins, carts, and bathrooms cleaned."

The only answer Brown got was "we're okay, we're fine. We've ordered the six feet [social distancing] rule." Amazon went to great lengths to present a false image of safety to the public.

"People were coming in sick... The ambulances were there every day," Christina continued. "If you had a fever you could just go in through another door to get in because they would only do checks at one of the doors," she stated, calling her building "a madhouse."

According to Christina, her sister was approached by management in June of 2020. The company was curious if Poushawn wanted to work in the "Safety COVID Department" where she would "tell workers to stay six feet apart" and other safety procedures. "She said 'okay,'

because she was so concerned [and] worried about the safety of others.”

In April 2020, Amazon introduced its own COVID-19 testing center. Before then, “you had to drive across whole cities to get a COVID test,” she explained. Instead of “getting doctors and nurses” to come to the warehouse, Bezos had “Amazon employees testing other employees.”

“My sister was trained by another Amazon employee to ... stick a swab in another employee’s nose,” she explained. “She was not a nurse or a doctor, she had no medical training.”

“This is a trillion-dollar company that put her in a position she had no business being in. They broke the law by having her COVID testing,” she said. “It’s disgusting. Amazon is a trillion-dollar company and Jeff Bezos is [one of] the richest men in the world. Why in the world did you have other employees COVID testing other employees with no training or medical background. What were you thinking and why?”

Amazon is notorious for employing its own in-house medical personnel. As the WSWS has explained, “Incidents involving Amcare ... suggest that its role is to intervene [in] a medical emergency, to initiate a pro-management paper trail about an incident, which can then be used to deny a worker’s claim of injury.” Amazon appears to have expanded this questionable practice in its approach to the pandemic.

Amazon was alerted the day that her sister was found lying unresponsive in her bed, having complained the previous day of a headache. “I waited two and a half weeks for them to get back to me,” she said, hoping the company would assist and help the family determine the cause of death and arrange for the funeral. “Still to this day,” the company has not provided assistance.

Brown was forced to arrange and pay for the burial herself in the face of the company’s inaction. The exact cause of death has never been determined due to a Virginia law which does not mandate a medical examination when foul play is not suspected.

Finally, in the “second week of February,” Amazon called. “We’d like to offer you and your mother *six weeks* of grief counseling,” she said the company told her. “I wonder, if you lose a parent, if six weeks of grief counseling will do it,” she said, looking toward Poushawn’s daughter, who had come to support the protest.

“It’s just like it was yesterday. She was my baby sister... She was a single mother, a wonderful aunt,” she added.

The protest was organized by Christina Brown with the

help of several local activist groups and participants from the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), who recently named their union hall in Poushawn’s honor. Aside from the WSWS and another local news source, no media had shown up to cover the event.

Brown noted this in her comments: “No one’s here from the *Washington Post* because Jeff Bezos owns the *Washington Post*. Shame on you for not reporting this. [My sister died] 30 minutes away from here. This is happening in your backyard.”

In addition to remarks about her sister, Brown also called attention to the plights of other Amazon workers. “My sister would have wanted me to say their names and so do I,” she said. Christina sent condolences to Rafael Reynaldo Mota Frias, a New Jersey Amazon worker who collapsed and died over the summer from heat exhaustion, as well as workers whose stories have been previously reported by the WSWS, such as a mother-to-be who was denied COVID-19 leave despite being hospitalized over the summer. “There are thousands of stories [like this] out there,” she said.

She concluded by calling on news publications to reach out to her and report on her sister and these other stories. “Jeff Bezos puts people in a position where they could go into work and not come home.”

The protest occurs against the background of a rising wave of worker struggles at Amazon in recent weeks. Last week, Amazon tried to discipline workers after a fire in the facility caused hundreds of workers to protest the company’s lack of safety. Workers have protested at Amazons across the United States and internationally in recent days.

Brown mentioned these struggles in comments to the WSWS. “All of these people walking out... Every day I see another strike happening, and they need to continue. Every day they come in and put their lives on the line for a trillion-dollar company for only a little bit of money.”



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