

The firings at Amazon's Staten Island warehouse

Diary of a socialist Amazon worker: Why we need democracy in the workplace

Austin Bailey
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The following is the fifth 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.

Towards the beginning of the month, an incident at Amazon's Staten Island facility propagated quite a stir. At least 100 Amazon workers staged a protest against unsafe conditions after management attempted to force them on the job while smoke from a previous fire in a trash compactor still hung thick in the air, smelling of carcinogens. One worker was hospitalized.

These concerned workers gathered in a designated management area and demanded to be sent home with pay due to the hazardous work environment. About 80 workers were suspended for daring to speak up about safety—ironic considering Amazon officials constantly parrot lines about safety being a top priority for the company. I'm told the latest news is that the majority of the affected workers had their suspension revoked, but that does not mean we workers should be complacent, letting the incident fade into yesterday's news.

It's abominable that workers can lose their livelihoods over the most arbitrary reasons. Or perhaps it is better to specify how reprehensible it is that corporations reign over workers like monarchs: workers

are disposable subjects, meant to serve the detached, unsympathetic aristocracy that is indifferent to anything anathema to their interests, as if convinced they're put in place by divine right.

How lawless of a society we live in wherein legitimate concerns for safety are discarded, and workers are actually punished for possessing the same instincts of self-preservation shared by virtually all of life on Earth. The danger of inhaling industrial smoke—especially in an Amazon warehouse, which are infamous and despised for being poorly ventilated—should not even be a matter of debate, truly. Not only did the Staten Island workers inform Amazon management many of them had respiratory ailments, but someone was also sent to the hospital. Is it not criminal that Amazon can force workers into hazardous environments regardless of health risk? Every manager involved in the incident should be held liable in court!

The capitalist class should not be allowed to get away with instituting such authoritarian regimes in the workplace. For all of the pomp about American democracy, workers have little say or control in anything. It is entirely reasonable, perhaps even “common sense,” that the workers responsible for the factory's operation should be able to dictate matters of the workplace through democratic means.

Why the lack of democracy in the workplace; in the land of the free? On that note, what was the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) up to? The ALU won a foothold in the New York warehouse on pretenses that the union would grant workers more control and sway in the facility. But when several dozen workers walked out, the ALU made no attempt to rouse every worker to protest, even though doing so would have been

protected by federal and state law as a necessary health and safety stoppage. The ALU's failure to call the entire shift out left the most courageous workers out on a limb, exposing the absence of unity or solidarity in the ranks of the ALU.

Instead, it seems the union's leadership is more interested in photo ops with President Joe Biden, whom Jeff Bezos's *Washington Post* endorsed for president and who was backed in the 2020 election by massive donations from Amazon and its management.

Since no one else will do it for us, the truth is that we workers can only protect our lives by stationing ourselves in the conductor's seat; the ruling classes are behaving like an intoxicated driver drunk on profit and war fever, and must be removed.

Our lives and safety are at stake. In addition to the fire at Staten Island, two more fires took place that same week at Amazon warehouses in New York state. Amazon is preparing for a potential reiteration of the ghastly Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, when over 100 workers, mostly young women, were burned alive at work. They couldn't flee the burning building because the company locked them in to prevent them from walking out over safety concerns. What if the same thing happens to us?

Amazon constantly tells us safety is its top priority while demonstrating the opposite. Last year, six workers in Illinois died on the job because Amazon forced them to stay at work while a series of devastating tornadoes ripped through the state. Despite continued outbreaks and surges of COVID-19, the corporation has done everything possible to cover-up the pathogen's presence in its factories.

However, it must be acknowledged that while 100 workers may seem insignificant, the rebellion of "Amazonians" in the United States—the global epicenter of world capitalism—carries serious social weight, like the slow, consequential movement of Earth's tectonic plates.

Amazon workers in particular toil under a draconian security-surveillance apparatus, made fearful by the constant threat of termination for the slightest perceived infraction. Amazon's private FBI, GSOC, which enjoys a budget rivaling police departments in many large cities, restlessly hunts for any and every sign of workers militancy.

The fact that the group of Amazon workers balked in

the face of such a regime is no small feat, particularly given the fact that it accounts for the largest demonstration of Amazon workers in the United States to date. But they should not have been left hanging by the ALU. Nevertheless, though a small event, chemical reactions are sometimes accelerated by the most minuscule addition of a catalyst. And the courage these workers (whom I am in full solidarity with) has potential to spread like wildfire throughout Amazon and the rest of the international working class.

What we need is democratic self-organization, through committees led by the rank-and-file, to harness our strength and fight this company. It is time to stop waiting for someone else to take action for us. And although challenging the might of the powers that be seems daunting, rank-and-file organization starts with you and me.

With appreciation,
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