

Ten Amazon workers injured in violent workplace incident at JFK8 warehouse in New York

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In the early morning hours on Friday, a disgruntled Amazon worker reportedly pulled a fire alarm inside the JFK8 Amazon warehouse in Staten Island, New York, and began attacking coworkers and spraying them with fire extinguishers.

According to fire department officials, ten workers were injured in the attack, which resulted in the temporary evacuation of the warehouse. Two workers were transported by ambulance to the hospital.

This violent incident occurred amid extremely high tensions at the JFK8 warehouse, which employs around 4,000 workers. Workers at JFK8 warehouse voted in the spring to unionize as the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) won by a decisive margin, but as the end of the year approaches, management continues to refuse to acknowledge the result.

Tensions in the JFK8 warehouse are particularly sharp around the issue of fires and fire safety. Last month, around 80 workers at the warehouse were suspended for staging a workplace demonstration and refusing to work in the aftermath of a fire, with the smell of potentially toxic fumes still lingering in the air.

No motive has been established so far for the attack that took place Friday. “A disgruntled worker who was also partially unclothed attacked several workers with a fire extinguisher inside of JFK8,” ALU executive secretary Michelle Valentin Nieves tweeted Friday morning. “They were sprayed in the face and had to be taken to the hospital via ambulance,” she wrote, describing how the spray from the fire extinguisher had entered the victims’ noses and mouths.

When the fire alarm sounded, the reaction of workers was conditioned by the fact that workers were “already

livid,” as one worker put it, over the fire incident that took place last month, which resulted in a bitter confrontation with management and subsequent retaliation against dozens of workers who protested.

The fire broke out in a trash compactor inside the warehouse, releasing noxious fumes throughout the workplace. Several workers complained of trouble breathing, and one person was transported to the hospital. In that incident, management initially instructed workers to remain at their stations before eventually allowing them to leave.

When workers on the subsequent shift were instructed to begin working with the smell of fumes still in the air, as many as a hundred marched on management’s office and refused to work. Amazon responded to this protest over unsafe conditions—one of the most significant workplace actions by Amazon workers to date—by imposing retaliatory suspensions against dozens of the workers involved.

Meanwhile, three fires were reported at Amazon warehouses in the US in October, including at the ALB1 facility in Albany, New York, where workers have also attempted to organize.

In this highly charged context, the issue of workplace safety in relation to fires in the warehouse is sensitive, so any fire alarm—even a false alarm—triggers legitimate fear, stress, and anger on the part of many workers.

When the alarms initially sounded on Friday, according to ALU vice president Derrick Palmer, management told workers to remain at their stations. “Workers were eventually evacuated,” he tweeted Friday morning, “but were originally told by management to stay inside as the fire alarms went off.”

Management’s instructions for workers to stay at

their stations during the fire alarm were seen by many workers as a repeat of the incident that took place last month, causing many workers to simply erupt with anger.

On one video posted to social media, a worker reacts to a manager's evidently callous reaction to the alarm. "Close the f— laptop and help people get the f— out of the building," she says. The worker goes on to describe how Amazon employs people who wear "safety" badges, but who are unresponsive when it comes to the genuine safety concerns being raised by workers while a fire alarm is going off.

In a statement on social media, Valentin called the incident Friday "another emergency situation mishandled by management putting workers under stress and in danger."

One JFK8 worker who spoke to the *International Amazon Workers Voice* after the incident Friday recounted arriving at work shortly after the alarm had been pulled. By that time, the warehouse had been evacuated, and police and firefighters were on the scene. The evacuated night shift workers and the workers on the following day shift had been told to wait outside. Some workers on the day shift got tired of waiting and used voluntary time off (VTO) to go home.

Finally, management dismissed the day shift with pay but did not provide any further information. "They just said, 'Go home.' That's it," she said. "I don't know whether those who used VTO will get paid." Although ALU officials were on the scene, they were not able to provide members any information on that score.

According to the worker, management's response to the false alarm was likely influenced by the defiant protests that erupted after the fire last month. "They didn't want to take that risk again, and they sent us home," she said.

Despite the fact that workers at JFK8 voted by a decisive margin of around ten percent to unionize in March, the highly profitable trillion-dollar international conglomerate has refused to acknowledge the union, instead stringing out frivolous legal proceedings before the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) with endless red tape.

The ALU was able to attract support among militant Amazon workers at JFK8 by positioning itself as nominally "independent" of the established labor

bureaucracy and both political parties, winning an election during the same period that the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) union was defeated in Bessemer, Alabama. However, since winning the vote at JFK8, the fledgling union has openly courted the support of the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO establishment, diminishing its claims to "independence." It has also lost subsequent votes as it sought to expand its base to other warehouses.

There have not been any changes to the unsafe and unjust working conditions that drove workers to attempt to organize in the first place, and workers' essential demands have still not been met. These demands include an end to the oppressive "rate" system, massive pay increases to meet inflation and an end to management surveillance and harassment.

The militant mood at the JFK8 warehouse reflects a rising tide of opposition among Amazon workers across the country and around the world, which parallels similar patterns among autoworkers, rail workers, and teachers. Last week, a Pittsburgh Amazon driver issued an important statement calling for fellow workers to form a committee to organize a struggle against the company. "It is time for all of us to unite together and stand up to these companies," he wrote.

Amazon workers at the ONT8 warehouse in Ontario, California, where ALU is also attempting to organize, recently described low pay and aggressive exploitation by management in interviews with the IAWV. "Everyone is underpaid," one worker said. Another worker described working 11- to 12-hour shifts: "Workers are not going to go back to the 1930s. Workers are not going to sit around and stay quiet. Bosses cannot do what they got away with back in the day, and workers aren't going to let that happen, either."

Despite having voted decisively to unionize in March, it is November and workers at JFK8 are still working without a contract.



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