

# Railroad workers visit Baltimore Amazon fulfillment center workers to explain their struggle and appeal for support

Our reporters  
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On Sunday, a contingent of CSX rail workers and supporters of the Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee (RWRFC) visited Amazon fulfillment centers in the Baltimore area to discuss with Amazon workers the issues at stake in the rail struggle and the significance of Congress's unprecedented move last month to impose a contract.

RWRFC members distributed copies of a resolution adopted following Congress's strike-breaking intervention and sought to appeal to Amazon workers for support.

"We declare Congress's move to impose a contract on railroaders that they rejected to be completely illegitimate," the resolution begins. It insists that "it is an attack on the democratic and Constitutional rights, including the right to strike and the right to participate in a meaningful contract vote, not only of railroaders, but of the entire working class. If it succeeds, it will set a precedent that will be used against other sections of workers in the future."

RWRFC members met with support from Amazon workers. Many workers had been aware of the railroaders' struggle, with some encouraging them to strike despite the government's ruling.

"I believe they have the right to go on strike," said Alvin, an Amazon employee on break, who had a lengthy conversation with an RWRFC member. "It becomes a danger and a hazard when you've got men working [without] sick days, and they start crashing the trains and ... derailing. They'll be singing a different tune then."

"They're trying to eliminate the engineers and just have one man per train," Sven, a maintenance worker from CSX, responded.

"My father was in the railroad," replied Alvin. "He worked for the Long Island Railroad (LIRR). It was a long time ago, in the 1970s. He was doing the same thing [the rail workers today are doing]. ... He was going back and forth from working as an engineer and conductor.

"It was really bad. They would throw paint on you, but you would still have to work through the day. You had to

keep it going. He was a conductor. He would refrain from talking about it so he wouldn't be so mad. He was fighting for his co-workers. They got rid of him. From there, my father then went on to driving trucks [until he] got hurt."

"The conductors always have it bad," said Sven. "[The rail operators] are always trying to fire them. The train master ... will try to spy on them. If they do minor things, your vest could be unbuttoned."

"You're not lying," Alvin replied. "Little things will get you taken off. They really were doing that because they didn't want to pay for an increase in their wages. [The rail operators] would say 'it's easier to fire them.' It's what the train operators are doing now."

Alvin was asked for his response to Biden's claim that a rail strike would hurt American families. "That's a lie," he said. "It wasn't too much when he gave our tax money to the Ukrainians [and the] Azov Battalion Nazis. I don't hear the Anti-Defamation League coming after Biden," he exclaimed. "How about this? We don't pay any of the politicians. ... Since they're not doing their jobs, they don't need to get paid.

"I work in hell," Alvin said, turning to the conditions at his job. Management tries to guilt workers into overwork during the holiday season by claiming if workers like him didn't work hard, "they tell me little kids won't be able to have a Christmas."

Amazon workers have been on the front lines throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the owners and investors in the corporation have been made rich, Amazon workers' lives have been treated with naked contempt. The company has publicly reported COVID-19 cases at its American facilities only once. In the meantime, the company has systematically dropped all public health protections from the virus in its warehouses.

"Let you stand in there for just a second" without moving packages, a young worker explained, then "[the management] will be on your back." Another worker at a

nearby gate repeatedly described management as 'slavers.' The worker explained that due to the peak season, they had been working 10- and 11-hour shifts and that managers wanted to deal with workers as little as possible and actively avoided addressing problems.

The workers complained that their breaks were too short to be meaningful with the time it takes to clock out and walk anywhere, especially with the long hours. A CSX worker asked them if the stories he heard about Amazon workers having to pee in jugs was true. They replied yes, "all the awful stories you hear about working at Amazon are true."

Amazon has recently been on a job-cutting spree as its growth during the pandemic has slowed. This is because of a decreasing number of people staying home, as well as the federal government's efforts to raise interest rates and deliberately put people out of work to lower inflation. Last week, Computer World reported that layoffs in Amazon's white collar departments totaled 20,000 this year, double the previously-reported number.

"It's not fair. The prices keep going up. Lyft, Uber, they keep going up [in cost]," explained another Amazon worker waiting at the nearby bus stop. "How are we supposed to survive?" the worker asked rhetorically. In response to this, a railroader explained the recent pay increases totaling 24 percent the government had included in their contract.

"What they're not saying is that we haven't been given a pay raise in the three years" since the last contract ended. "So it's really a 24 percent increase for six years," or an average yearly raise of 4 percent, half of the current inflation rate.

Other workers questioned the government's dictatorial treatment of the rail workers. "Why does something terrible like a strike have to happen [for workers to be listened to]? Why can't the government just get it done for me?" asked Michelle, a worker at a nearby logistics facility. Michelle insisted that the federal government "could make it happen" for railroad workers but refused to help them.

She exclaimed: "I've never heard of a job that doesn't come with sick days! How is anybody living like that!?"

Following discussions with Amazon workers, the railroad workers reflected on the conditions experienced by their fellow industrial workers. "What that girl was saying about her job being hell, she wasn't kidding," explained Sven in reaction to Amazon workers describing their jobs. "I had a job as a packer once. We were racing against the clock, riding around on a pallet jack. [We would go] around trying to pick items off the shelves. They gave you a ticket and a certain amount of time to fulfill the order. You've got to throw items on the pallet so they don't fall over. Some items are out of stock, you've got to wait for forklifts to bring them to you. It's not an easy job what they're doing."

Sven referred to a recent situation at the Amazon JFK8 facility that resulted in dozens of workers being reprimanded by management for protesting efforts to force them back to work after a fire. That was "criminal," he said. "You get carbon monoxide in the air, it sneaks up on you and you get sleepy. You won't even know what happened" by the time it's too late.

The railroader explained that Amazon workers "need an organization that is going to unite them." He explained that, while the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWE) might defend you if you "get into some sort of dispute with the company," he has seen many good workers let go in recent times.

The conflict between the rail workers and the Biden administration has decisively revealed the rotten, pro-business relationship that has bloomed throughout this period between the government, companies and the trade union leadership.

President Biden has also declared his goal is to see a union installed at Amazon, whether in the form of the "independent" Amazon Labor Union or a more well established organization. Workers must draw sharp lessons from the experience of the rail workers. Any organization brought in with the support of Washington, however, will work as the various rail unions have—to restrain workers and to force them to accept poorer working conditions and lower pay.

The way forward is to form independent rank-and-file committees to unify their struggles with workers in their industry and others. This has been the role of the RWRFC throughout the current struggle, as well as the Amazon BWI2 Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee, formed last year at an Amazon warehouse to fight against the unchecked spread of COVID-19.



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