

“They treat us like robots or slaves”

Worker describes conditions at Amazon’s JFK8 facility in Staten Island, New York

Erik Schreiber
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Amazon is the world’s largest online retailer and had revenue of \$513.98 billion in 2022. Its founder, Jeff Bezos, is one of the world’s richest men. This tremendous wealth was created through the systematic and relentless exploitation of workers for which Amazon is well known. It is no coincidence that Amazon is one of the most dangerous companies at which to work. The rate of serious injury at Amazon’s warehouses is more than twice as high as that of warehouses owned by other companies.

Looking for a way to fight against the company, workers at the JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island, New York voted in favor of the fledgling Amazon Labor Union (ALU) last year. Almost immediately after the election, ALU leaders such as Chris Smalls embraced the leaders of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and the Democratic Party.

More than one year after the ALU’s victory, conditions at JFK8 have not improved. Pay remains low, and the work remains exceptionally dangerous, as the recent death of Amazon worker Caes David Gruesbeck in Indiana illustrates. Despite the ALU’s election victory and a favorable decision before the National Labor Relations Board, Amazon refuses to recognize the union. Workers at JFK8 have no contract with Amazon—and negotiations have not even begun.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Nicole, an Amazon worker at JFK8, about her job and working conditions. Her name has been changed to protect her anonymity. This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Erik Schreiber: How long have you been working at JFK8, and what positions have you held?

Nicole: I started in 2021. I work in the single pack department, where we pack single items into boxes. In the morning, we punch in and go straight to our stations. An electric machine, like a train passing through, brings a yellow tote. You pull an item down and scan it, and the computer shows you the box number where it goes. I pack one item per box. Then I close the box, tape it, scan it, and send it along.

Sometimes they send me to pack flow, where you scan a lot of items from different totes and put them in one box. In pack flow, there’s too many items!

Sometimes they send me to stow, where you have to scan items and store them in big bins that the robot brings to you. When someone orders an item, the robot brings the bins to a picker, who puts it into a yellow tote. Then the tote gets sent to pack.

All these jobs are physically demanding. You have to use your hands and your legs. You’re on your feet for a long time. Sometimes you have to pack heavy items. You have to be on your feet for 10

hours.

ES: What is it like working at JFK8?

N: It’s not easy. In the summer, we suffer. It’s very hot in there. They put a lot of fans at our stations, but it doesn’t help us. People go to the bathroom to refresh themselves and get water. Sometimes, people pass out. They get taken outside, and an ambulance comes and takes them. In the winter, it’s okay, because it’s cold.

The break room is too small. I don’t go to the big break room, because there are too many people there. Sometimes people have to stand up to eat in the big break room because it’s so crowded. I only go there to use the bathroom or get water. Then I come back to where I’m packing and sit somewhere. The smaller break rooms that they created for us because of COVID are gone now.

The bathrooms are far away. You have to walk for three to four minutes before you get to them. They give you up to 10 minutes for a break, but that includes the time you spend walking to and from the bathroom. If you spend more than 15 minutes, you’ll be in trouble. You have to rush to go to the bathroom and come back. Sometimes there’s too many people in the bathroom. Sometimes there’s no paper to dry your hands, or there’s no soap.

JFK8 is big. It has four floors. But there’s only one small elevator. You can stand there for five minutes before you get the elevator. It’s also far away, so we usually have to take the stairs. I pack on the third floor, and my legs are tired by the time I climb up there.

When a machine or computer breaks down, we have to stand there for one or two hours until they fix it. They don’t want us to use our phones while we’re waiting. You can’t sit down, either. If we sit down, they will come and talk to us. “Don’t sit down!” I don’t know what they want us to do.

ES: Can you describe how Amazon views its warehouse workers?

N: They treat us like robots or slaves. You can’t sit down, you just stand up all the time. It’s painful. They come and talk to you if your break is a little too long. “Why haven’t you packed for more than 10 minutes?”

ES: What is Amazon’s rate system?

N: They expect certain productivity rates from us. Each department has its own rate system. For single pack, 60 items per hour is the minimum, but they don’t really accept it. You have to be above 60. A good rate is over 80. In stow, you have to stow 250 items an hour, if they’re small items. In small pack, you have to pack more than 250 per hour. In flow, I don’t know the rate. Maybe 200 an hour.

If you don’t make your rate, the computer will give you a write-up. The manager will come and talk to you. If you keep missing your rate,

they will come and talk to you again. If you're written up six times, you get fired. Sometimes when they give you a write-up, they don't tell you. People can get fired without knowing why. You come in the next day and scan your badge, but it won't let you in. Afterward, you receive an email that you've been fired.

You have a certain amount of unpaid time off (UPT). If you use too much UPT, or if your UPT is negative, they don't tolerate it. They'll fire you.

Then there's time off task (TOT), which is the time that you spend not working. If your TOT is five minutes, that's okay. But if it's more than 10 minutes, they will come and say, "What happened? Why did you take so much time? Why didn't you do your work?" Sometimes when I go to the bathroom, I ask one person to pack one item for me after I've been gone for five minutes. If they know that you're a good worker, then they won't say anything to you about your TOT. But you can get written up if you have too much TOT.

When it's slow, I can take two minutes and go talk to one person. Then I come back and pack.

ES: Can you tell us about Amazon's surveillance of its workers?

N: They have cameras everywhere. They have cameras on the computers you use to pack. And the managers are walking around all the time watching us.

ES: What do you think about Amazon's suspension of JFK8 workers who protested being ordered to work last year during a fire, while smoke and fumes were still in the building?

N: It's no good. They were protesting for their rights. There was a fire, but they asked them to go back to work. That was not fair. They don't have the right to suspend them.

There was another fire in March this year. The fire was in a trash bin inside JFK8 at night. When we got there at 7 a.m., they didn't let us enter. Everybody who came in the morning stayed outside. By 8 o'clock, they let us go to the break room, and then they asked us to go home. I think it's because of the protest last year that they asked people to go home when there was a fire this year.

ES: How do you and most JFK8 workers get to work?

N: I have to take a train and a bus, like most workers. During the week, I take the train to Saint George, which takes 40 to 42 minutes. Then I take the bus to JFK8, which takes 40 minutes. The total trip is an hour and 30 or 40 minutes. I start my shift at 7:15 am, so I wake up at 4:15 am to get the train at 5:26 am. I have to walk for 12 minutes to get to the train station. Those who come from Brooklyn have to take the ferry to Saint George and take the bus.

On a Saturday, I take two buses. It's longer. The bus that replaces the train takes one hour and 15 or 20 minutes. On Saturday morning, it's not easy to get the bus. When the bus comes, there are too many workers there, fighting to get on.

I used to live in Queens. I took the A train for one hour and 30 minutes, then I took the ferry for 30 minutes, then I took the bus. That's why I moved to Staten Island. But if I had a car, the drive to JFK8 would only take 15 minutes from my house. Only 15 minutes! But the bus and train don't go straight across: they go south, then come back north again. There's no bus that comes straight to my house in Staten Island.

ES: JFK8 workers voted a year ago to organize into a union and fight for contract demands, but contract negotiations under the Amazon Labor Union haven't even begun yet. What demands are important for you and your coworkers? What things need to be changed?

N: The wages are not enough. We work hard, and New York City is

very expensive. They want us to pack more than 80 items. They have to pay us more money. And once you've worked at Amazon for three years, you don't get any more raises. And with the rate system, they make us work like robots. That's no good.

The benefits should be better. When we see a doctor, Amazon's insurance pays only 10 percent or 20 percent of the bill. You have to pay the rest by yourself. That's not fair. I went to see a doctor and gave them my insurance card. I received a bill for \$350, and I don't know if the insurance paid them or not.

They have to change the condition of our break room. We work hard, so we need a good break room. Sometimes we need a place to sit, and we shouldn't have to walk so far away. Four minutes before going to sit down. That's too much. You have to walk far away for the bathroom, too.

Because the conditions are no good, almost everyone has pain in the legs. We stand up for a long time. And too many people are sick in JFK8 because of the conditions. People are getting sick every day. That's why they increased the VET.

ES: Have working conditions changed since the ALU was voted in?

N: No, nothing has changed. Now, Amazon is making it worse because of the ALU. They want the managers to be tough on us. It's not like before. Last week, they gave one lady a write-up. She went to see human resources (HR), and someone from the ALU went with her to represent her. HR told her that they don't recognize the ALU.

ES: How do JFK8 workers view the ALU today?

N: They say the ALU is doing nothing. They've forgotten about them. They act like the ALU doesn't exist anymore.

ES: Since its election victory, the ALU has appealed to the federal government, particularly the Democrats, and to established trade unions such as the Teamsters. But they haven't held mass membership meetings with workers in Staten Island.

The *International Amazon Workers Voice* calls for the political independence of the working class. We call for Amazon workers to organize into democratically controlled rank-and-file committees to discuss workers' demands and how to fight for them. We also say that Amazon workers should link up with logistics workers more broadly. What is your opinion of these two different strategies?

N: If they have the courage to do that, that's a good idea. They fire people a lot, so people are scared of talking. They will just go and do their work just to have money to pay the bills. Because of the union, Amazon is not playing anymore. They are very tough. Too many people were fired. They complained about the conditions to HR and they fired them.



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