

Former Amazon worker Christina Brown campaigns among UPS workers to seek justice for her sister Poushawn Brown

Our reporters
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Former Amazon employee Christina Brown visited a United Parcel Service worksite on Friday to seek justice for her sister, Poushawn, who passed away after being told to illegally work at a Northern Virginia Amazon facility's COVID testing center.

Christina has been a relentless force seeking to expose Amazon's illegal abuse of its workforce. In 2021, Christina and her younger sister Poushawn worked at Amazon's DDC3 warehouse in Northern Virginia. In early January 2021, Poushawn, who had been working at Amazon's short-lived COVID-19 testing department despite having no previous medical training (a violation of federal law) complained of feeling ill to management. Denied time off, she finished out her shift, went home to sleep it off and never woke up again. Local laws require the family to pay the prohibitively high cost for an autopsy if a death is not determined to be a homicide or suicide.

Christina, appalled by Amazon's treatment of her family, has given countless news interviews, visited with Amazon workers throughout the country and has held a number of demonstrations outside company founder Jeff Bezos' Washington D.C. mansion to expose its criminal abuses of its workforce.

In bringing her sister's plight to UPS workers in the middle of an intense contract battle, Brown is seeking to unify the struggle of two very powerful sections of the working class in a struggle to place human needs over private profit interests.

"I'm reading every day about UPS [workers] striking, I want you to know you have my full support," she said in an open letter distributed at the hub. "Not only do you have my full support, you have my family's full support and I know if my sister was here you would have [my sister's] support, 100 percent," she says.

UPS workers are currently in the last days of a contract which is due to expire at the end of this month. They are seeking improved wages, job safety and the elimination of a

lower-paid tier of workers, called a 22.4, who have been used to reduce the pay of the company's drivers.

"The 22.4 is a full-time combination driver, which means you have benefits but you're a 'cover' driver... you're not going to have a route, so you're going to have to run every route," said a worker who had recently transitioned to a driver position and was making the lowest pay possible under the contract. "I made more inside the warehouse at full time pay" than as a driver, they said.

"You can't file overtime grievances, you can't file a G-8 grievance [a guaranteed eight-hour day]" as a 22.4, the worker added. "They push me up to 13–14 hours a day" in my shift. "There's three different pay scales depending on how you were hired."

Workers expressed deep sympathy for Christina's sister, and also anger and amazement at the conditions which prevailed at Amazon. Many asked if there was a GoFundMe account or somewhere that they could show support for her family. Brown asked that they also sign a petition which has been brought forward to demand justice for her family.

"How would she know how to [give COVID swab tests]?" A worker with 12 years seniority wanted to know. Christina explained that an L3, an entry-level position, trained Poushawn to take nasal swab tests while the proper personal protective equipment (PPE) was not being provided. "She made \$14.50 an hour to do this," she said, a poverty-level wage in suburban Washington D.C.

"They [Amazon] played with my family for months]" after Poushawn's death, Christina explained. Finally, they gave the family "six weeks of grief counseling." At the same time, "they fired me because I wouldn't come back to work after my sister died."

"Every day, an employer puts somebody in a position like that to save money," Christina continued. "That was not her line of work. They worked her until she died. If [Amazon] didn't have the money to keep its workers safe then it shouldn't have been open" during the pandemic, she said.

She told others that it was her goal to introduce laws which would ban employers from forcing workers into positions like her sister was at Amazon.

“I’ve got very little experience talking with Amazon drivers, but the ones I’ve talked to say the company is awful,” said a UPS worker. “What do they mean counseling? What does that help you do? Six weeks, it’s going to take a lifetime” to get through the trauma. “How much money is that son of a b—— Jeff Bezos worth? \$200 billion? He could give [hundreds of dollars] to every person in this country and still be rich,” the worker exclaimed.

Brown currently has an ongoing lawsuit against Amazon for its criminal treatment of Poushawn. The company has dispatched an assortment of lawyers to frustrate Brown, who is fighting her case without counsel.

Speaking of his own job, the worker explained “this factory is a meat grinder... If you work in a building with a turnover like this, you need at least \$30–40 an hour. This needs to be a career. I hope we do go on strike because this company made \$13 billion in profits last year. We’ve got 300,000 people, what’s an additional \$3–4 for us? I think they can manage it.”

Another worker denounced UPS CEO Carol Tomé’s choice to push the disclosure of her most recent earnings until October, a transparent ploy to keep hidden her massive pay package from the public as the contract is discussed.

“Heat exhaustion is a big issue. You hear about how the average UPS driver makes \$93,000 a year. But do you know what you have to do to make that much? You have to work 60+ hours a week to make that. People are killing themselves to make that money.”

When Christina explained that Amazon’s base starting wage was \$15, the worker was incredulous: “How is that possible?” In fact, UPS also pays sub-poverty wages as low as \$15.50 an hour in some areas, according to the provisions of the contract with the Teamsters. This is so low that in many areas of the country management has been forced to unilaterally increase starting pay to attract enough workers.

Christina continued, relaying a story she had previously shared with the *World Socialist Web Site* while working as a driver for Amazon.

“I got in three accidents while working for them. Do you remember the ice storm we had in 2018?” she asked. “It slid the truck right off of the road. I called the manager and he said, ‘You’re about a mile-and-a-half away from the [drop off points for] three other packages. They’re in the same area. Can you go?’ I hung up the phone [on him],” she exclaimed.

“I think there needs to be a strike. People are dying at this job,” the worker said. Of the prospects of a United struggle among logistics workers, he said, “That would be huge. This

is bigger than us.”

Offering her thoughts about her discussion with the UPS workers, Brown told the WSWs that “I think these guys want fairness. And they should get what they want. I don’t think they’re asking for anything that’s unreasonable.”

Numerous workers were familiar with the Biden administration and Congress’s intervention last year to impose a pro-company deal on over 120,000 railroad workers, many of whom were also Teamster members, when they threatened to strike. Workers were fearful that something like that would happen to them, with some noting that the government was “watching” their struggle.

A sharp warning must be made to the UPS and Amazon workers who are looking with hope to the official trade unions to resolve their conflicts with management: Without independent, rank-and-file organizations answerable only to the membership, the Teamsters bureaucracy will work hand-in-hand with the company and the government to strangle any serious strike, just as it did in last year’s railroad struggle.

It is for this reason that UPS workers from around the country have taken it upon themselves to form their own independent rank-and-file committee, intended to “organize ourselves—not to ‘support’ the bargaining committee and to cheerlead for them, but to enforce our democratic will, and position ourselves to countermand the inevitable sellout.”

The declaration also calls to expand their struggle. “Our real allies are workers around the world who are fighting the same attacks by the same giant corporations and the same treachery by union bureaucrats. They are not the strike-breaking Democrats and Republicans whom the Teamsters bureaucrats cavort with.”

Seeking to unite themselves with fellow logistics workers at Amazon and beyond is the necessary precondition to beat back the government-corporate attempt to reduce the logistics workers to industrial slaves. We encourage workers at Amazon and UPS to write in and join this fight.



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