

Heavy police deployment as US Amazon drivers launch nationwide strike

Our reporters

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Amazon workers: Tell us what your demands are and what your working conditions are like by filling out the form below. Submissions will be published anonymously.

Amazon drivers across the United States launched a nationwide strike Thursday against poor wages and working conditions, as well as the online retailer's refusal to recognize their decision to unionize. While the number of workers involved is not known, around 10,000 Amazon workers are members of the Teamsters union, which called the strike.

Hundreds of workers manned picket lines at individual locations, including at the DBK4 warehouse in the New York City borough of Queens. The strike is expected to last until Christmas.

The walkout is the largest ever of Amazon workers in the United States. It is part of a growing movement by workers across Amazon's global operations, following protests in 20 countries during Black Friday last month.

The global dimensions of Amazon itself prove the need for a global movement of the working class, led and controlled by the rank and file. On Thursday, members of the Socialist Equality Party distributed copies of a statement, Amazon strike in the US poses need for global rank-and-file strategy against hi-tech exploitation, which declared:

The power of the multi-billion-strong international working class, the source of all the wealth on the planet, must be leveraged against the tiny oligarchy that runs Amazon and society as a whole.

To accomplish this, the statement continued:

... the strike must be guided by a strategy worked out and democratically enforced from below by workers, through rank-and-file committees made up of representatives from every Amazon facility.

In New York City, police responded aggressively to the strike to prevent pickets from shutting down facilities. In Queens, New York, cops arrested two people, including a Teamsters official, for allegedly impeding traffic. According to workers who spoke to the WSWs, the second worker was an Amazon driver not even involved in the strike, whom police arrested for not exiting the facility quickly enough.

The large JFK8 facility in Staten Island was on virtual police lockdown, with police fencing up parking lots and stationing dozens of uniformed cops on the scene. The obvious aim was to intimidate workers inside the warehouse and keep them from walking out. JFK8 workers are members of the Teamsters who have been working without a contract for two years

since voting to join a union. They have also voted to strike.

However, Teamsters officials conspicuously left JFK8 out of the warehouses involved in Thursday's strike. According to some workers, a strike at the warehouse may begin this Saturday.

"Look at all these cops," one worker told the WSWs, pointing toward more than a dozen armed police gathered near a bus stop by the warehouse.

He continued:

See those white shirts on some of them—they're lieutenants and majors. Amazon's got the power to call in a whole division. It's what you can demand when you got billion-dollar government contracts. All this fencing? It wasn't here yesterday. They put this up overnight. And look at the number of trucks going out—hardly any. That means they diverted most of them to other warehouses, ahead of the strike, to play it safe.

"There's plenty of reasons to strike"

Delivery drivers' main demand is that they be recognized as Amazon employees. Currently they are classified as contractors employed by a huge number of small third-party firms, which make deliveries under the Amazon Logistics brand.

A driver in Queens said:

All of the drivers are hired by companies, so Amazon says we don't work for Amazon, but then the companies say we do work for Amazon. So everybody has plausible deniability.

Companies and individual drivers are evaluated by Amazon through a system, which is "kind of like an Uber score," the driver said.

He said:

If their score is higher because of us, then they get more routes and can hire more people. Any reason could happen for them to say we're not fantastic, and then we don't get guaranteed work. Anything could happen. I could hand you a package, but the app would say I scanned it way too far from your house and then my score goes down.

“It’s like that by design” to divide the workforce, he said. “The driver doesn’t even spend much time in the building,” where he might interact with co-workers inside the warehouse. “He gets his route, picks up his packages ... and he leaves. I’m in the van by myself. The most I’ll get is a dispatch call.

“You don’t get holiday pay, you don’t get overtime,” he continued. Workers are supposed to have a 40-hour guarantee, he said, but “that doesn’t happen. If I get my packages done within seven hours in a day or if I’m working great and get it done in five, that’s it. I don’t get my guaranteed 40. I have to work extra days to get my 40, and that’s when I’m doing well.”

He continued:

That extra time is not time-and-a-half. If I work 44 hours, I get paid 44 hours. I don’t get time-and-a-half or holiday pay. Calling out the day before, during or after a holiday is considered a resignation. There’s plenty of reasons to strike.

Christian, another driver in New York, said:

We’re tired of them not acknowledging us. They’re ignoring what we want. We want it better today, safer conditions, better benefits. They’re not giving us benefits. I could get better insurance out in the street. Plus, them failing to meet us as Amazon workers, is ridiculous. I wear Amazon branded everything and drive an Amazon brand, but I’m not working for Amazon? That makes zero sense.

They use these strategic techniques to win the law over so they don’t have to be responsible for us. So we’re out here to prove that we’re a union, and this is what we want.

An Amazon driver from Palmdale, California, said:

As you can see in society, everything is expensive in this country. We have to remind the youth, our generation, if you don’t fight for our rights, this is only going to get worse. So we have an opportunity to exercise our rights, and we have to actually fight.

Teamsters officials versus rank and file

While Amazon workers are determined to win their demands, the motivation of the Teamsters bureaucracy in calling the strike is to bolster its own credibility after selling out several major struggles.

While UPS workers are honoring the picket lines, massive layoffs are underway at the package delivery company as part of the “Network of the Future” program, an Amazon-style restructuring of the package delivery giant. This is being enabled by a new labor contract with UPS, which includes no meaningful protections against closures. Defying the near unanimous vote by the rank and file to strike, the Teamsters bureaucrats pushed through the deal last year under false pretenses, claiming it was a “historic victory.”

There is significant support for the strike among UPS workers. At the UPS Grande Vista hub in Southern California, which is slated to be closed before converting into an automated hub, several workers expressed a

desire to join Amazon workers on the picket lines.

Jeffrey, an Amazon driver from Palmdale, said:

We are basically doing UPS work for poverty wages. We can’t maintain ourselves or anyone we’re trying to support. If UPS can have a sustainable wage, why can’t Amazon drivers have it?

We’ve had several UPS workers come on out and show their support with us. They take time off their days, off their schedule, just to be with us and show that it’s all right to fight for what you want, fight for your work.

The bureaucracy aims to establish the same corrupt relations at Amazon which they have at UPS and other employers. Meanwhile, both the bureaucracy and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos are major backers of the Trump administration, demonstrating that the Teamsters apparatus is joined at the hip with management and hostile to the workers they claim to represent.

Amazon workers are striking to deal a blow against one of the most powerful corporations on the planet and are inspiring other workers to join them in a fight against inequality.

One Amazon driver said:

We have to have a universal workers’ union. You talk about the warehouse workers separate from the drivers. The railroad unions may feel separate from the bus drivers. We’re all working class, but in our day-to-day hustle trying to live, we don’t see the next man is doing the same thing.

But I also feel like it starts with us, us doing this might make the warehouse workers inside feel like, “You know what, we should do that too.”

As yesterday’s WSWWS statement concluded:

A rank-and-file rebellion is needed. Just as workers must organize to smash the power of the oligarchy that controls Amazon, they must also organize to smash the power of the union apparatus and restore workers’ control.

New structures, rank-and-file committees, are being built to prepare for such a fight.



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