

“It’s killing us”: Following workplace death, Amazon worker at JFK8 in Staten Island speaks out on unsafe working conditions

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On April 9, Leony Salcedo-Chevalier, 34, was fatally struck by a delivery box truck backing up in a loading dock at the JFK8 Amazon fulfillment center in Staten Island, New York.

Amazon, founded by billionaire oligarch Jeff Bezos, is a poster child for workplace injuries in America. Low-paid workers at the company’s warehouses are pushed to the limit using the latest technologies, and injured workers are often denied workers compensation and thrown out the door, as shown in previous investigations by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

More serious incidents have also occurred, including the 2023 death of Caes David Gruesbeck, a fulfillment center worker in Indiana; three deaths at New Jersey facilities in the summer of 2022, covered up by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA); and two construction workers who were airlifted with critical injuries at an Amazon construction site in Indiana.

Following Chevalier’s death, JFK8 workers forced a temporary halt to operations. This is the second time that workers at the warehouse have done so: in October 2022, workers refused management orders to continue working during a fire in the facility’s cardboard compactor. Management retaliated by firing 80 workers. The following month, 10 were injured at the facility after a disgruntled employee pulled the fire alarm.

Trump has nominated David Keeling, the former “safety” director for both Amazon and UPS, as head of OSHA, which shows the oligarchic character of the US government.

Amazon is only one part of America’s industrial slaughterhouse. On April 7, two days before Salcedo-Chevalier’s death, autoworker Ronald Adams Sr. was crushed to death at the Stellantis Dundee Engine Complex in Michigan. Two postal workers have also died of apparent heat-related causes so far this year. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees has launched investigations into these incidents, which the union officials are helping to cover

up.

In 2022, workers at the JFK8 facility voted to join the Amazon Labor Union, the company’s first US facility to unionize. But three years later, workers still have no contract, while the ALU, wracked by internal crises, merged with the Teamsters union last year. Teamsters’ general president Sean O’Brien is one of many Trump supporters among the union bureaucracy, and the Teamsters are collaborating with management at UPS to destroy tens of thousands of jobs.

In light of this, the *WSWS International Amazon Workers Voice* is urging workers to take matters into their own hands and organize a rank-and-file committee to investigate this and other needless incidents at JFK8 and fight for workers’ control over safety.

A JFK8 Amazon worker who supports such an investigation contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* in order to testify on safety conditions at Amazon. The worker wishes to remain anonymous; the interview was edited for brevity and clarity.

WSWS: How long have you've worked at Amazon?

I've been working at Amazon for [a few years]...I've done pretty much everything in the warehouse like sortation, picking, packing, moving heavy box furniture around, putting boxes in boxes, making boxes—all of it.

WSWS: How did you hear about the tragic death of Leony Salcedo-Chevalier at JFK8 on April 9? Have you heard any new information about what happened and how these types of accidents are being prevented in the future?

I heard about it by seeing demonstration photos, where workers were holding signs about how a fellow worker has died. I'm like, “Oh s—t. Oh s—t. Someone in my workplace just died.” I did a Google search afterwards. I got more information and saw that you all did reporting and then I got handed the physical copy of the article too [by a WSWs team outside JFK8].

I haven't heard any news recently. I wish I had more information.

WSWS: Could you describe the working conditions at Amazon? Have you even been injured?

I feel like I'm being injured every day, to be honest, you

know? I feel it in my back. And I've talked to other workers, who've also said that this is killing us. That's maybe hyperbolic, but also maybe not. I asked a co-worker the other day if she was okay because she was limping and she's like, "I got injured because of the safety shoes." The metal in the shoes literally injured her foot and it looked really serious.

In terms of a health facility, it's minimal. They have bandages, disinfectant, they have a lot of painkillers. That's pretty much it.

JFK8 seems significantly less put together than a lot of [other facilities]. A lot of the equipment is kind mismatched and a lot of things are just in disrepair. The equipment malfunctions a lot, and a lot of the time they'll just blame you. There's a lot of dust. The fans are constantly blowing and I feel like my eyes get kind of irritated.

It's a little bit insidious because the management methodology they use is subjective. They're not accountable to any sort of rank-and-file discipline. They could fire you and make up their own sort of narratives and judgment calls about your [work] rate. I've been written up for several things, but almost everything that I'm written up for I objectively disagree with the facts listed.

Sometimes management will ask me in the middle of a 10 hour shift what happened last week, or what happened yesterday, and I can't give you the precise details and I've basically said I don't remember. They'll use that to their advantage if you don't have an adequate explanation and write you up.

But a lot of it's just like, my body hurts and I'm getting aspirin or I'm needing to use a restroom or a machine is giving me trouble. One time a manager told me to hang out for a while because they didn't have anything for me to do and then another manager comes up to me and asks, "How do you explain this period where you're not working?"

[In terms of Amazon's workplace surveillance,] they're not watching you for safety reasons. They're watching you because they want you to go faster, right? They'll say there's a safety concern, but you know they want you to go faster.

WSWS: What type of safety training is there?

You watch a bunch of video training modules called KNetS that put a lot of text on the screen. Having things described to you is helpful, but it's different than physically doing the thing. It's a different learning style and I know for a lot of people, it's probably not their learning style which is where safety issues come in—like, how am I going to remember all of this?

WSWS: What do you think about the call for the rank-and-file to have control over workplace safety and investigate any workplace accidents?

Yeah, that's where we should be at, right? There's so much paternalism in the workplace. It's kind of like, just trust management. Management will keep you safe. But it's actually, no. We're adults and we should have control over the conditions of our own lives, especially in our workplace.

I think it's absolutely essential for workers to have their own rank-and-file committees, committees of action. Because for management it's not in their interest. They just want you to go faster. There's a conflict of interest. They leech off all the surplus from us and they don't even have an interest in safety concerns. They're kind of like, "Another one bites the dust?" I guess there's a lot of people who are unemployed in our society so we'll just fill a new position, right?

Which is why, also, your rank-and-file committee investigations into the recent deaths of autoworker Ronald Adams Sr and the postal workers are so important. Management won't compromise itself; it won't look into anything that might create liability for itself, implicate its responsibility. And a lot of union leadership is the same way and of the same mindset, unfortunately. They won't pursue anything that creates serious liability for corporate, as a whole. They want to maintain bargaining relations.

There should be paid time that workers are given to form our own committees, which is something like a traditional union would do. New York is my first real experience with a union. We're still fighting for a contract.

In [a previous job], a manager told me, "Oh, you're interested in unions? I used to work at a union, but the thing about unions is, you have to have the union collaborate with management. In order to have an effective union, you have to work with management." Well actually, that's kind of contrary to what a union should do.

Ultimately, what they're doing to us, what they're doing to our bodies, they're putting us in unnatural conditions. We're working in order to survive. It feels like we're working more than anyone, repetitive motions. And it's like, we're going to do this safely? It's outrageous.

And it's outrageous on another level: We as workers should autonomously try to be safe [inside and outside the job], but at the same time, we can't because the way the economy and the larger society is structured. There's larger political issues which really need to be addressed. It's killing us, not only because of the weakness of the unions, but because we're being led by these genocidal Democrats and Republicans.

It's killing us and it's killing the world. It's killing our class brothers and sisters in Palestine. We're bombing hospitals. We're not building hospitals. We're destroying hospitals. That's our health care program and safety standards when it comes down to it.



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