

The Amazon workers' Black Friday protests and the strategy of global class struggle

Tom Hall

2 December 2024

Amazon workers took part in protests in more than 20 countries on Friday and last weekend, during the Black Friday shopping event. The protests sought to call attention to poverty and brutal working conditions at Amazon, which generally reach a low point due to extreme overwork during the holiday season.

This is the latest sign of mounting opposition at Amazon. Workers at the JFK8 warehouse in New York City are set for a strike vote soon, after years of stonewalling by the company over a new contract, while limited strikes have also been carried out across the US and in Britain. This is part of a global upsurge of class struggle which also includes recent general strikes in Italy and Greece, and a strike by 50,000 postal workers in Canada.

The enormous anger within Amazon's workforce found only partial expression in the demonstrations, which were not of a mass character. Among the most prominent was a rally by 200 workers in New Delhi, India. This reflects the incapacity of the union bureaucracy, which organized the protests, to mount a serious struggle on the basis of their nationalist program aimed at securing labor-management "partnership."

Nevertheless, the global character of the protests points to the urgent need for an international strategy to guide the struggles of the working class at Amazon and as a whole. Such a program must be aimed at the expropriation of Amazon and other huge transnational corporations, and their conversion into public entities controlled by the working class to meet human need.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is fighting to build a world movement based on such a global strategy. The statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) initiating the IWA-RFC explained that it would "unify workers in a common worldwide struggle, opposing every effort by capitalist governments and the reactionary proponents of the innumerable forms of national, ethnic and racial chauvinism and identity politics to split up the working class into warring factions."

Amazon encapsulates the need for such a program. Founded in 1994 as an internet bookstore, its operations have grown to dominate 21st century capitalist economy. Amazon employs over 1.5 million people in over 50 countries, with shipping to over 130 countries. More than 2.7 billion people shop on Amazon, according to World Population Review, or one in every three human beings on the planet.

Most of its workforce is concentrated in massive "fulfillment centers," where the company has pioneered the use of new industrial robotics and invasive tracking systems to monitor workers and force them to "make rate." Other corporations have spent years playing catch-up in a bid to "Amazonify" their own operations.

Amazon's reach expands into every sphere of the economy and human culture. Its Amazon Prime Video service has more than 200 million subscribers, making it one of the largest streaming television operations. It is also a major player in the infrastructure of the internet itself, with Amazon Web Services (AWS) accounting for nearly one-third of the world's cloud-computing market.

Its vertically-integrated operations include the Whole Foods and Amazon Fresh grocery chains, Amazon Pharmacy, as well as brands for office supplies, baby diapers, clothing and the Kindle e-reader. Delivery service Amazon Logistics, which barely existed a few years ago, has grown overnight into the largest private logistics operation in the United States, with 5.9 billion packages delivered last year.

The degree of economic control exerted by Amazon goes even further than this. The majority of Amazon's business comes from so-called "third party sellers," a category which includes everything from multinational electronics companies to boutique craftsmen. The shift towards online retail which Amazon has helped spearhead has had a massively disruptive effect on small businesses and large physical retail outlets across the world.

In short, Amazon controls a vast infrastructure that plays a central role in modern human civilization. The resources it

controls could be used to eliminate poverty overnight by quickly and efficiently distributing goods to those who need it most. Its warehouse and logistics network could be used, for example, to rapidly distribute food and medical supplies to areas affected by famine or natural disasters.

Amazon's robotics could be used to ease the strain of work, while simultaneously using greater efficiency to finance the shortening of the workweek and increase pay. Its streaming platform could allow access to great works of culture to a world audience, elevating social consciousness while helping to break down barriers of prejudice and national narrowness.

Instead, Amazon is a byword for inequality and exploitation. It is run, not to benefit humanity, but to benefit its Wall Street shareholders. Chief among them is founder and chairman Jeff Bezos, the world's second-wealthiest human with over \$220 billion dollars, a sum which has nearly doubled since the start of the pandemic.

The WSWS has extensively documented the horrible conditions at Amazon, including workers living in their cars and being denied workers' compensation after suffering injuries on the job. Amazon has become the stalking horse for high-tech exploitation across the economy. Automation and artificial intelligence are being used as weapons for mass layoffs at UPS, national post offices, the auto industry and elsewhere.

As for Amazon Prime Video, its output consists largely of recycled Hollywood trash that debases popular consciousness and directs attention away from social reality towards escapist fantasies, serving an important ideological function for the ruling class.

The levels of inequality with which Amazon is associated are incompatible with democracy. Trump's new cabinet is of, by and for the billionaires, with its estimated net worth (including "unofficial" appointments such as Elon Musk to head the so-called Department of Government Efficiency) at \$340 billion. This is a government of fascists and the ultra-rich pledged to rip up democratic rights and to carry out historic attacks on the working class.

While Bezos is, to date, not directly involved in the new government, the Bezos-owned *Washington Post* declined to endorse a candidate in the November election, a calculated move by Bezos to leave open the possibility of working with Trump.

To defend its position as the world's superpower and enlarge the wealth of US oligarchs, American imperialism, with its "partners" in tow, has effectively launched World War III. The different fronts in this war, from the proxy war in Ukraine to the genocide in Gaza and the future war against China are over the control of key supply chains, natural resources and markets. Here too, Amazon plays a

central role, with a \$10 billion AWS contract with the NSA spying agency and another \$2 billion contract to build surveillance centers in Australia.

To counter the global strategy of the ruling class, workers need international organizations and an international perspective.

The trade union bureaucrats, who strive towards corrupt relations with management and capitalist parties in each country where they operate, cannot and will not ever organize such a struggle. Instead, they are backing "their own" ruling class against workers in other countries. In the United States, they are even preparing to line up with Trump's planned dictatorship.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees urge workers at Amazon to form rank-and-file committees, as part of the IWA-RFC, to carry out a fight for their rights, including the right to a livable income; an end to abusive monitoring, speed-ups and the "make rate" system; and job security.

Rank-and-file committees will combine a struggle to transfer power from the apparatus to the shop floor with a fight to unify the struggles of the working class on a world scale. Through the activities of the IWA-RFC, these committees are being actively built, with a particularly strong presence among postal and logistics workers.

The operations of transnational corporations like Amazon have also united, to an unprecedented degree, the working class in an international process of production. In every country, working conditions are converging as workers fight against the same giant corporations. The attempts by the capitalists to divide workers by whipping up national hatreds has been undermined by the operations of the global capitalist economy itself.

Above all, this strategy must be connected to an independent political struggle of the working class against capitalism. Not a single one of workers' demands can be met without a frontal assault on private ownership and the profit system.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact