

After death at JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island: Amazon workers must take control over workplace safety!

WSWS International Amazon Workers Voice
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The recent death of Leony Salcedo-Chevalier at Amazon's JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island, New York is the latest preventable tragedy to blacken the company's already infamous record. Salcedo-Chevalier was struck and killed by a truck while working at the fulfillment center's loading dock late one night. The *International Amazon Workers Voice* calls for an investigation, to be conducted by rank-and-file JFK8 workers, into the circumstances of this needless death. We also call for workers' control over safety at every Amazon facility.

Whatever the immediate circumstances however, it is clear that the people responsible for Salcedo-Chevalier's untimely death include Amazon management, company founder Jeff Bezos, and would-be dictator President Donald Trump who is dismantling all workplace regulations and the entire financial and corporate oligarchy which he serves. The worker's death is not a freak accident but the predictable outcome of a systematic, profit-driven indifference to workers' lives. Injury and death on the job has become a part of daily life for American workers, and Amazon leads the way.

Amazon's dirty record

The company is responsible for an extraordinary number of injuries. In 2023, the average injury rate for warehouses with more than 1,000 workers, excluding Amazon, was 3.8 per 100 workers, according to an analysis by the National Employment Law Project. Amazon reported an injury rate of 6.5 per 100 workers for 2023, which is 71 percent higher than that of its peers. Amazon's rate of injuries requiring a job transfer was 5.1 per 100 employees: nearly double the national average for warehousing overall (2.6 per 100 employees).

Some of the most recent incidents include:

In May 2023, Caes David Gruesbeck died of blunt force trauma to the head while trying to fix an overhead conveyor. Amazon was fined a derisory \$7,000 for his death.

In October 2022, a fire started in a trash compactor at JFK8, spreading smoke and fumes throughout the facility. Worked stop only after management was confronted by a crowd of angry

workers, dozens of whom were later fired.

During a three-week period in summer 2022, three workers died at Amazon facilities in New Jersey.

- In December 2021, Amazon management ignored days of tornado warnings and kept workers on the job at the DLI4 warehouse in Edwardsville, Illinois. The tornado caused the building to cave in, killing six workers.

- Poushawn Brown, a worker at an Amazon facility in northern Virginia, died in her sleep of unexplained causes in January 2021. Brown, who was 38 and a single mother, had been working as a COVID tester without adequate training or protective equipment. Her family could not afford to have an autopsy performed, and Amazon never provided the family with assistance of any kind.

- Only a few days ago, two workers were injured during a fire at the Amazon Web Services data center construction site near South Bend, Indiana. The severity of their injuries required them to be airlifted to a hospital.

For workers control over safety!

It is impossible to have safe working conditions as long as Amazon and other workplaces are under the thumb of Wall Street oligarchs. Workers showed the alternative through their own practice when they forced management to shut operations after Salcedo-Chevalier's death for two shifts. While the Amazon Labor Union endorsed the work stoppage, the initiative for it came from the workers, not from the union.

This spontaneous initiative must establish an organizational form. The *International Amazon Workers Voice* calls on Amazon workers to take action to assert their right to control over workplace safety. All such issues must be in the absolute control of rank-and-file safety committees in each facility, elected from trusted workers and excluding both managers and union officials. Workers must insist that they have the right also to stop work whenever it is unsafe, including if Covid or other diseases are spreading throughout the facility, with full pay to make workers whole.

The *International Amazon Workers Voice* proposes the following

safety-related demands to Amazon workers:

Workers' control over the speed of operations!

• Workers' control over surveillance technology, which must be used to ensure safety!

• Full medical coverage, funded entirely by Amazon, for all workers!

• Workers' discretion over the closing of facilities because of safety concerns (e.g., fire, environmental pollution, or dangerous weather)!

• Immediate and appropriate medical care, either on site or at the nearest medical facility, for all injured workers!

• Accommodation, including job reassignments, for all injured workers for as long as necessary!

• Financial compensation and time off commensurate with the worker's injury!

Workers' monitoring of air quality in the warehouse!

• Universal distribution of personal protective equipment during outbreaks of infectious disease!

• Distribution of safety gear (e.g., goggles, gloves, helmets, earplugs) to all workers who need it!

The IAWV proposes this only as a first step in a movement pitting the working class against the corporate oligarchy. Ultimately, Amazon and other giant corporations must be expropriated, and run democratically by workers themselves to meet human need, not profit. Amazon's logistics network and hi-tech innovations can then be used to quickly move goods to where people need them the most, helping to eliminate poverty and other social problems.

Rank-and-file action versus bureaucratic betrayal

The Amazon Labor Union (ALU), which JFK8 workers elected to represent them three years ago, has done nothing to prevent this mounting toll of injuries and deaths. The union was founded after worker Christian Smalls led a protest against unsafe conditions during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Amazon fired Smalls for his action. This incident itself shows that waiting for Amazon management to come to its senses will lead workers nowhere. Change will only come if workers take the initiative to enforce safe working conditions themselves.

After the death, the ALU issued a statement raising a series of demands, including a starting wage of \$30 per hour, 180 hours of paid time off, one one-hour and two 20-minute paid breaks per shift, lower productivity rates and an overhaul of the process for granting accommodation to injured workers. The union announced that it would begin its next campaign in "the coming days and weeks." It added that "the next big action is coming sooner than we think." But it offered no details about the nature or the timing of the action.

This is the first time that ALU has even raised demands over workplace conditions since they won the union election in the spring of 2022. While these demands are legitimate, the ALU officials have no strategy to win them. If these words are to be

made good, then rank-and-file Amazon employees must prepare themselves to enforce their democratic will through workplace action.

ALU won its election because workers saw it as a rank-and-file alternative to the existing, bureaucratically controlled unions which are tied to the political establishment. But within days after the vote it began developing corrupt relations with Democratic politicians and bureaucrats from the Teamsters and other unions. Meanwhile, three years later, workers still do not have a contract and ALU has not proposed any serious action to win one.

This led to the union's connections with the rank-and-file to quickly evaporate, culminating in its decision last year to merge with the Teamsters. Through this, JFK8 workers have been brought into an organization whose officials have enforced decades of sellouts, including a contract at UPS two years ago which has led to tens of thousands of layoffs and its refusal to call a strike of railroad workers in late 2022, buying Congress time to pre-emptively ban it and impose a contract.

Under Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien, the union is one of several which has embraced Trump, lying that the fascist-minded billionaire is a friend to workers and embracing his racist "America First" nationalism and attacks on immigrants. Nothing more clearly demonstrates the hostility of the union officials to the workers they claim to represent than their support for a would-be dictator.

The Teamsters' involvement in unionization drives at Amazon is only to bolster its own dues base. In a strike last December which included several New York area Amazon facilities, it initially left workers at JFK8 on the job, isolating the most militant warehouse in the country.

JFK8 workers must escape the bureaucratic shackles and link up with workers in the Teamsters across the country, and the working class over the world. A real, fighting unity of the global Amazon workforce can only be established in opposition to the treacherous union leadership through rank-and-file, independent organization.

To take up this fight, contact the World Socialist Web Site at wsws.org/workers.



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