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Chicago Amazon Workers Picket with Supporters—and Their Cars

Friday 17 April 2020, by [MAASS Alan](#) (Date first published: 6 April 2020).

“Quite a way to start your week off, right?”

Bekin Mehmedi was watching a long line of car protesters, all blaring their horns, drive through the gates of Amazon’s main delivery facility in Chicago.

<https://www.facebook.com/DCH1United/videos/265541007790049/>

He and 20 or so workers and their supporters walked a socially distanced picket line, their fourth in six days, early on Saturday, April 4.

Workers at DCH1, as the Southwest Side warehouse is known, have been organizing strikes around health and safety issues on selected shifts. A week ago they made demands on management in a petition, after managers confirmed the first case of a worker in the facility with COVID-19.

<https://www.facebook.com/DCH1United/videos/239422820435370>

The company revealed a second infection April 3, but workers say they’ve learned of two more cases that managers are keeping quiet about.

DCH1 Amazonians United wants the warehouse shut down for a thorough disinfection, with full pay for all workers, plus a commitment to guarantee health care if workers or their family members fall ill from the coronavirus, among other demands.

<https://www.facebook.com/pg/DCH1United/posts/>

The early morning Saturday shift that usually starts Mehmedi’s work week is smaller than other shifts at the warehouse, which processes Amazon Prime deliveries for much of Chicago, sending a continuous file of vans out across the city. The night before and two previous evenings, strikers showed up for larger shifts but didn’t clock in—and instead urged their coworkers not to either, for the sake of their health.

Across the country, fear and anger have been turning to action in the sprawling network of Amazon fulfillment centers and delivery stations. In press releases, Amazon calls its employees “heroes” for “helping people get critical items they need in this crisis.” But workers say their health needs to be considered essential, not just their labor.

<https://truthout.org/articles/amid-pandemic-workers-walk-out-building-momentum-toward-general-strike/>

<https://www.pcmag.com/news/amazon-workers-plan-staten-island-strike-to-demand-covid-19-protections>

CAR CARAVAN

On Saturday morning, when supervisors came out of DCH1 for a second time to tell strikers to either come in to work or get off the property, their threats were interrupted by the car caravan. Organized by community supporters, the caravan rolled up to the plant entrance and then circled around the parking lot. The picketers’ chants of “Shut it down, clean it up!” were punctuated by a deafening

chorus of car and truck horns.

After the caravan made several laps around the lot and the street in front, police showed up and blustered at the car protesters and picketers alike to move along. Traffic control wasn't too effective that day. DCH1 stayed blockaded for the better part of an hour as the morning's second flood of delivery vans backed up into the warehouse.

The van drivers work for independent contractors, a tactic by Amazon to further divide the workforce. They got out, joined in some chants, and milled around talking with each other and with the strikers who usually load up their vehicles.

INCOMPETENT

Mehmedi said Amazon's famously painstaking organization vanishes when it comes to workers' safety. "As usual," he said, "whenever it involves their employees, they're incompetent—there's no other way to describe the way they're handling the situation."

Mehmedi says Amazon's idea of sanitizing since the first COVID case was reported is to send other subcontracted employees through the facility between shifts with a spray bottle and a rag. "They don't even have the sense to have a mop bucket with Clorox in it, to at least clean the rags. It's just cleaning to make things look presentable," he said.

Samir Qaisar says workers want measures that could actually make a difference. "On the floor," he said, "they haven't done a single safety measure as far as rearranging operations. They don't want to slow production."

He and other members of DCH1 Amazonians United fear that their "essential" facility could be a vector for spreading the virus. Workers come from throughout Chicago and its suburbs to work at the warehouse a few miles southwest of downtown.

<https://www.facebook.com/DCH1United/posts/883973055357803>

Maria Gonzalez was on the picket line to support her husband, one of the safety strikers. She was thinking of one of his coworkers who lives with elderly parents. "Now she has to go find a place to live by herself so that she doesn't put her parents in danger," Gonzalez said.

"There are coworkers who have children with asthma and lung conditions. These women are terrified. They have to come to work to be able to feed their children, but they're afraid to hug them when they go home."

Vanessa Carrillo, a veteran at DCH1 after nearly three years on the job, echoed that fear. "It's just ridiculous that in 2020, we have to be out here protesting for our safety, for our families' safety, for the customers' safety," she said. "We think it's unacceptable."

The shift-long safety strikes are calling for DCH1 to be temporarily shut down for a thorough cleaning, but that's for starters.

<https://www.facebook.com/DCH1United/photos/a.700184560403321/884252641996511/?type=1&theater>

Workers want Amazon to continue to pay wages to and provide health care coverage for its "heroes" if they or their family members get sick or have to self-quarantine; to slow the rate of packages flowing through the warehouse; to disinfect the warehouse on an ongoing basis; and to start telling workers the truth about COVID cases immediately.

EARLIER ORGANIZING LAID GROUNDWORK

If DCH1 workers have a leg up on their coworkers around the country, it's because a core group began organizing last summer.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/amazon-working-conditions-covid/>

They drafted petitions for coworkers to sign and presented them to management at shift meetings. Despite not being protected by a union, speaking up worked: last year DCH1 workers got supervisors to provide clean drinking water and to shut down the warehouse at full pay on one of the summer's hottest days because of lack of air conditioning.

This year, DCH1 Amazonians United took up a campaign initiated by Sacramento workers to get the company to make local managers honor Amazon's stated policy that any employee who works 20 hours per week or more accrues paid time off for vacation and sickness.

<https://medium.com/@dch1united/amazonians-united-wins-pto-for-all-amazon-workers-f17e6ffbb192>

In March, Amazon responded to the pressure and announced it would do so.

The number of their coworkers gaining confidence to sign petitions and take action has grown over the past year.

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/04/chicago-amazon-warehouse-walkout-coronavirus-pandemic>

Members of the group say that the four shifts were only half full during their safety strikes so far—and that every Amazon employee they talk to, even if they say they have to go in because they need the hours, wants the company to do more.

Every employee other than management, that is. "There's just a culture here of disregard for workers—disrespect and a lot of lies," said Bradley Rydholm as he stood outside DCH1 early Saturday morning. "A lot of people just laugh at what management tells them at this point, because you're never going to hear something straight up. We want to be able to trust the place we work for."

COVERTLY ORGANIZED COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The car protest came as a happy surprise to picketers as they stood in a steady cold drizzle. It had been organized on the down low by labor and community groups to keep word from getting out to police and the company.

Noreen McNulty and Glenn Allen heard about the action from a local union organizer they knew. They have worries of their own in the pandemic—Allen is a pharmacist in a hospital emergency department—so it felt "very therapeutic," McNulty said, to lay into the horn and watch police scramble to deal with the mini-traffic jam.

On Chicago's City Council, the area surrounding the Amazon facility is represented by Byron Sigcho-Lopez, one of six socialist alderpeople elected last year.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jun/29/chicago-democratic-socialists-city-council-local-politics>

Sigcho-Lopez has been a fixture at protests outside DCH1. On Saturday, he had to step in when frantic police started pounding on car hoods and even shoved a protester—after yelling at protesters to keep six feet of social distancing.

<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2020/4/4/1934251/-Amazon-workers-stage-a-Wildcat-Strike-on-Chicago-s-Southside>

Community and labor support will be vital for Amazon workers. The company is relying on most people not thinking about the health of the workers who get packages to their front doors. From Jeff Bezos on down, management will treat drivers and warehouse workers who speak out as disposable—especially with a guaranteed supply of applicants desperate for a job in the coming

depression.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-01/amazon-s-hiring-spree-followed-no-special-coronavirus-precautions>

The stakes are high as the epidemic starts taking a terrifying toll and a “new normal” sets in. At DCH1, workers are fighting against both the new normal and the old one—and their supporters need to have their backs, even if standing shoulder to shoulder now means driving bumper to bumper.

Alan Maass is a labor journalist based in Chicago.

Other articles about Amazon on ESSF site

http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?page=mot&id_mot=9615

P.S.

<https://www.labornotes.org/2020/04/chicago-amazon-workers-picket-supporters—and-their-cars>