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SHAKOPEE VALLEY NEWS

SATURDAY, JULY 20, 2019

BREAKING NEWS AMAZON WORKERS ON STRIKE! AKOPEENEWS.COM



AMAZON WORKERS picked a Prime Day for a protest

PHOTOS BY EMMA HARVILLE

BY MADDIE DEBILZAN
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Inside the Amazon Fulfillment Center in Shakopee Monday, hundreds of workers pack, package and organize. Robotic machines buzz, boxes echo as they hit the shelves, and one woman lies down a prayer mat at her work station.

Inside the facility,

Kaylan Lee, a software engineer for Amazon in Seattle, applies sunscreen at a planned strike outside the Amazon fulfillment center in Shakopee on Monday, July 15. Monday's temps hovered in the low 90s in the afternoon with a heat index of 105 degrees.

you'd never guess it was one of Amazon's busiest days of the year. You'd also never guess hundreds of protesters were preparing to march outside the facility, chanting, sweating and collectively chugging hundreds of plastic water bottles to combat the 90-degree heat.

For the second time in seven months, workers at the massive fulfillment center in Shakopee walked off the job — this time on Prime Day, a two-day event in which customers flock to the retail giant for big savings.

Protest to 2 >

Protesters hold signs that say things like, "Amazon Unfair!" outside the Amazon fulfillment center in Shakopee Monday, July 15.

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PROTEST

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The workers' demands? Safe and reliable jobs, respect for workers and their right to organize for better working conditions, opportunities for advancement for the East African workforce and concrete action to address issues like climate change. An Amazon spokeswoman said last week those allegations are "baseless." An Amazon spokeswoman has said about 30 percent of the workforce at the Shakopee fulfillment center is East African.

The strike attracted media attention from local, major and niche media outlets from across the country, putting Shakopee on the map — again. It was the second time in seven months workers protested working conditions at the warehouse.

Amazon spokeswoman Donna Beadle said "roughly 15 associates" took part in the demonstrations Monday, although many more participated.

"It was obvious to the 1,500-full-time workforce that an outside organization used Prime Day to raise its own visibility, conjured misinformation and a few associate voices to work in their favor, and relied on political rhetoric to fuel media attention. The fact is that Amazon provides a safe, quality work environment in which associates are the heart and soul of the customer experience,



PHOTO BY EMMA HARVILLE

Asli Mohamed, a full-time Amazon employee who stores and stocks product, did not participate in the strike. She said she has no problem with Amazon's expectations on the job, adding that she's allowed to pray and go to the bathroom whenever she needs.

and today's event shows that our associates know that to be true. We encourage anyone to come take a tour anytime."

Monday afternoon turned out to be a scorcher in Shakopee with temperatures hovering in the low 90s and a heat index hitting 105 degrees. The protest was scheduled to last more than six hours, but the crowd dispersed around 6 p.m. when the rain came pouring down.

Workers and supporters shouted things like, "The people, united, will never be defeated!"

"I know it's hot, people, we got this!" One protester yelled. "Come on, louder!" "We work! We sweat! Amazon workers need our rest!"

'I'LL BE HERE EVERY DAY UNTIL AMAZON CHANGES'

Faizal Dualeh is a former Amazon employee who says he was fired Feb. 8 for joining 20 fellow employees in a strike in the middle of the night. He said he was always unhappy with how Amazon treated its employees — particularly its packaging expectations.

"I'll be the last one here.

PHOTOS ONLINE
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www.shakopeenews.com

Maybe I'll be here every day until Amazon changes," Dualeh said, laughing.

Mohamed Hassan, a leader of the protest and full-time Amazon employee, said employees are expected to

Protest to 24 ►



FILE PHOTO

Packages are sorted and prepared for shipment at Amazon's fulfillment center in Shakopee.



PHOTO BY EMMA HARVILLE

Michael Russo, a pilot with Atlas Air, was at the protest Monday to represent pilots and show solidarity with workers. "Pilots are just another line in the chain," he said.



PHOTO BY EMMA HARVILLE

Khasin Abdi, an Amazon floor manager, said he's never had an issue with the facility.

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PROTEST

► continued from 2

“do the job too fast,” adding they’re supposed to package 84 boxes per hour, and their 30-minute break counts as part of that hour.

“There’s no respect,” Hassan said. “Whether you’re working 10 years or a temporary, it’s the same.”

“That’s the main reason we’re here,” Dualeh said. “Amazon’s expectations are too high.”

Hassan, who supports his wife and eight children, said nothing has changed within the company since the last strike in December and he’s looking for other jobs.

Another Amazon employee, Muhamed Hassan said he has worked at Amazon almost three years and has been injured multiple times on the job, with no paid time off. When he went to the health center, he claims he was told to “put ice on the injury” and keep working.

SEATTLE CONNECTION

Protesters traveled to the fulfillment center from as far away as Seattle, where Amazon is headquartered.

Amazon software engineers Rajit Iffikhar, Kaylan Lee and Weston Fribley flew in from Seattle Sunday night to participate in the strike. Sweating and caked with SPF 50, they said back home in Seattle, it never gets this hot.

They participate in a group trying to get Amazon to pay more attention to climate justice, but on Monday, they said they were mainly protesting in solidarity with East African workers.

“We feel it’s very important to take responsibility for how Amazon treats its employees,” Fribley said.

Several speakers and Amazon employees talked at the protest, including Minnesota Representatives Brad Tabke and Aisha Gomez, Executive Director of Central Minnesota Islamic Center Jaylani Hussein and Amazon employees Meg Bradley and Hassan.

Hussein elicited loud cheers from the crowd when he stepped onto the stage.

“It’s not uncommon that some of the most important resistances are happening right here in Minnesota,”



PHOTO BY MADDIE DEBILZAN

Shortly after 2 p.m. Monday, July 15, nearly an hour before protests were scheduled to begin, about 20 people had gathered for the afternoon activities.

Hussein said. “Change is going to start right here in Shakopee.”

“Yeah!” Protesters yelled, raising fists into the air.

Hussein said when he visited the Amazon center, the prayer rooms were designated in “literal doorways.”

“I have worked with companies in this state who have created more welcoming spaces for their employees who have less than 50 employees who are Muslim, because they value every single member of their team,” Hussein said.

A woman from the back of the crowd shouted sarcastically, “But where would they find the space?”

Hussein pointed to her and said, “Exactly. They got a lot of space in (the fulfillment center). They got too much space.”

‘I SEE NOTHING WRONG HERE’

But not all Amazon employees sympathized with the protesters. Asli Mohamed, a full-time Amazon employee who stores and stocks products, did not participate in the protest.

She said she has no problem with Amazon’s expect-



COURTESY AWOOD CENTER

The Awood Center says a large continent of Amazon workers walked off the job on an early Friday morning in March 2019 to protest working conditions at the huge fulfillment center in Shakopee.

tations, adding that she’s allowed to pray and go to the bathroom whenever she needs.

“(Protesters) have their right, but I’ve never had an issue with anything. And all my friends... nobody has a problem,” Mohamed said.

Boxes full of prayer mats sit in multiple locations on each floor and certain rooms are designated for prayers. (Muslims pray five times per

day — three times during a typical Amazon shift.)

Amazon spokesperson Rachael Lighty said workers can also lie down mats and pray at their stations.

Khasin Abdi, an Amazon floor manager, said he’s never had an issue with the facility either.

“The majority of people I manage have no problem here,” Abdi said. “We have long hours, but it’s fun.”

Mohamed has been at Amazon for three years, and Abdi has worked there for two-and-a-half.

“The majority of people (protesting) are outside groups who don’t understand what it’s like to work at Amazon,” Lighty said.

Amazon spokeswoman Brenda Alfred said the facility provides “great employment opportunities with excellent pay — ranging from \$16.25 to \$20.80 an hour, and comprehensive benefits including health care, up to 20 weeks parental leave, paid education, promotional opportunities, and more.”

More than 2,500 employees work in the Shakopee fulfillment center, many of them Somalis who are bused in from the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis.

In November, Amazon made some concessions in response to the East African group’s concerns about productivity expectations. No unions represent Amazon workers in the U.S.

PILOTS SPEAK OUT

Warehouse employees aren’t the only Amazon workers seeking to break

ground with the company. An Amazon pilot’s campaign, called Pilots Deserve Better, was launched July 9, to “improve working conditions as contract negotiations continue to stall,” according to a press release. The website will be a resource for current pilots, investors and prospective pilots looking for a career with contracted Amazon carriers.

Amazon pilots feel bogged down with an increasing number of orders, while the number of pilots at the contracted airlines are decreasing, according to another Pilots Deserve Better press release. A recent survey showed 91 percent of pilots at Amazon and DHL-contracted airlines strongly disagree that their pay and benefits meet the industry standards for their peers doing the same job, and more than 60 percent of pilots said they are seeking employment at competitors like UPS and FedEx. The release also says dozens of pilots who fly for Amazon Air at contracted carriers including Atlas Air, Southern Air and ABX Air, protested outside Amazon’s annual shareholder meeting May 22, holding picket signs and running a mobile billboard that declares “Amazon Air pushing pilots to limit risks safety daily.”

Michael Russo, a pilot with Atlas Air, was at the protest Monday to represent pilots and show solidarity with workers. “Pilots are just another line in the chain,” he said.

Even though Russo said while he is not directly employed by Amazon, he wishes Amazon did a better job at “using its influence towards Atlas Air,” noting his airline doesn’t offer the same compensation and benefits as other airlines.

“We’re languishing under a substandard contract,” he said. “And we’re losing a lot of pilots.”

“With an alarming number of pilots at these carriers unhappy about their working conditions, management, benefits and more, it’s no surprise that they’re leaving for better opportunities,” Robert Kirchner, a long-time Atlas pilot, said in a press release.

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