

Somali-American Amazon workers demand better conditions

December 15 2018, by Kerem Yucel, With Nova Safo In Chicago



Somali-American Amazon workers demanding better working conditions protest at the the company's fulfillment center in Shakopee, Minnesota on December 14, 2018

A group of Amazon workers in Minnesota who are Somali refugees

resettled in the Midwestern US state demanded better working conditions Friday during a protest outside one of the retailer's warehouses.

Hundreds braved frigid temperatures to demonstrate outside of the Amazon warehouse in the Minneapolis suburb of Shakopee—home to a sizable Somali immigrant population from which Amazon has heavily recruited.

The protest was the latest effort by the workers, who say East African immigrants make up a majority of the workforce at the massive warehouse but go unheard.

"We don't have rights in the company," worker Abdulkadir Ahmad, 30, told AFP.

The workers, many of whom are practicing Muslims, say the required productivity rate is too high, the company is unconcerned about [worker](#) injuries and that the conditions don't allow practicing Muslims to pray as they otherwise would.

"We do not have enough time to pray. There is a lot of pressure. They say your rate is too low," Ahmad said.

The workers timed their protest during the busy holiday shopping season, hoping to force the online retailer to make changes.

Amazon's accommodations

They already have had some success. Amazon says it has offered accommodations such as providing prayer mats for workers, converting a [conference room](#) into prayer space during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and approving shift transfers for fasting workers.



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"Additionally, we've continued to hire and develop East African employees. We're a leader in this space and we feel really good about our record here," Amazon spokeswoman Shevaun Brown told AFP via email.

The company previously agreed to meet with workers to hear their concerns. The New York Times reported that it was the first known instance of any group succeeding in forcing Amazon to negotiate.

But workers say Amazon's efforts so far have fallen short.

"We are appreciative they've sat down and talked with us, but we are not seeing real action," activist Abdi Muse said.

Muse is the executive director of the Awood Center, a union-backed non-profit that organized the protest and helps East African workers in the state.

Protesters decry 'hurt and harm'

Demonstrating workers and [community leaders](#) who joined them in support on Friday say conditions at the warehouse are leaving people with serious ailments.

"When workers leave Amazon, they still live with the back pain, [chronic illness](#), and hurt and harm caused during their employment," said Ahmed Anshur, the imam at the Al-Ihsan Islamic Center in the nearby state capital of Saint Paul.



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Protesters said they want the multibillion-dollar company to give back to the struggling community that has been a major source of its workforce in the Minneapolis area by giving money to a community fund to help struggling immigrant families.

"It's not a handout or a donation," said Mohamed Omar, imam at another Minneapolis suburban mosque.

"This is so Amazon can give back into the community a portion of what they have taken so much of."

The retail giant has faced past complaints from warehouse employees about working conditions.

It has more than 100 "fulfillment centers" across the country where purchased merchandise is packaged and shipped. The centers employ more than 125,000 full-time employees, according to Amazon.

Bloomberg reported this week that warehouse workers in New York have announced plans to unionize.

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