

Workers killed on the job at online retailer Amazon

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The deaths of two workers employed at warehouses owned by online retailer Amazon.com reveal the harsh working conditions faced by millions across the United States. On June 1, Jody Rhoads, 52, died when a pallet jack collapsed and pinned her to the ground at a warehouse in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. On December 4 last year, Ronald Smith, 57, was killed under similar circumstances when he was crushed by a conveyor system while sorting boxes in Avenel, New Jersey.

The US Department of Labor has announced an ongoing investigation into Rhoads' death. Last week, the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) faulted four staffing agencies operating at the warehouse where Smith was killed with a "failure to perform a hazard assessment of the facility before assigning employees to determine if hazards existed."

Logistics firm Genco, which oversees the four staffing subcontractors at the Avenel site, was fined for "not certifying that a hazard assessment of the facility had been conducted before assigning employees to work." The five companies were each fined \$6,000 and given 15 business days to comply with the ruling.

In a statement released last week, OSHA spokesperson Patricia Jones said, "Temporary staffing agencies and host employers are jointly responsible for the safety and health of temporary employees. These employers must assess the work site to ensure that workers are adequately protected from potential hazards... It is essential that employers protect all workers from job hazards—both temporary and permanent workers." Despite Jones's mention of "host employers," i.e. Amazon.com, Inc., the agency declined to cite the online retailer for a violation.

In 2012, over 4,383 workers were killed on the job in the United States, amounting to roughly 3.4 for every 100,000 people employed. Of this number, deaths of

workers who were employed by contracting agencies made up 708, or 16 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

Amazon, whose owner Jeff Bezos ranks on the Forbes 400 list of wealthiest Americans with a personal fortune of over \$25 billion, is notorious for the abusive treatment of its workforce. Employees at the company's many fulfillment centers are often forced to work long shifts in extreme temperatures of hot and cold, often without air conditioning.

An investigative report by the *Financial Times* last year found that workers "might walk between seven and 15 miles" daily, and "must walk through a set of airport-style security scanners to prove they are not stealing anything," or else run the risk of being fired. In the US, the average Amazon warehouse worker makes \$11 per hour and often has little to no job security.

The sweatshop conditions that led to the deaths of Smith and Rhoads are the reality faced by growing sections of the US working class as part of the economic "recovery," spearheaded by the Obama administration. Last summer, in a bid to present himself as a defender of the "middle class," Obama delivered a speech focusing on "job creation" at one of Amazon's fulfillment centers located in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Obama proclaimed the retailer to be "a great example of what's possible," while calling for a list of pro-corporate measures "so communities hit hardest by plant closures can attract new investment."

Such business-friendly measures no doubt have contributed to the continued expansion of Amazon's warehousing centers throughout the US. Bloomberg.com noted that Bezos has been making an effort to "increase the online retailer's network of warehouses" in the US, adding that expenses for fulfillment centers had increased by 29 percent in the

first quarter of 2014.

The conditions and poor wages suffered by workers at the retailing giant's facilities are of a piece with the policies of the US ruling class as a whole. A report released in April by the National Employment Law Project (NELP) found that since the financial crash of 2008, 1.9 million high- and average-paying jobs in the private sector have been eliminated and replaced with some 1.8 million low-wage jobs. At the same time, real median household income fell from \$55,600 in 2007 to \$51,017 in 2012—a decrease of nearly 10 percent in just five years.

While this has occurred, agencies charged with overseeing the safety of workers have been gutted of funding. OSHA has undergone continuous downsizing and budget cuts, today employing fewer than 2,200 officers charged with overseeing the job safety of over 130 million US workers—or 59,000 workers per inspector.



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