

Hundreds of unemployed workers apply for jobs in Pittsburgh

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Several hundred people attended a job fair Wednesday in Pittsburgh in the hopes of landing one of the few job openings for part-time seasonal work at Amazon's newly opened distribution warehouse. The jobs will pay just \$10.75 an hour.

Held in the Garfield neighborhood—which has a poverty rate of nearly 45 percent, compared to 22 percent for the city as a whole—the fair attracted people from throughout Pittsburgh and even some surrounding areas. The event was advertised with a flyer placed in area residents' doors and then spread by word of mouth.

Camille Grady explained why she came. "I work at Taco Bell. I make \$7.50 an hour and even working 40-45 hours a week I get a check for \$300-\$350 before taxes. That is not enough. My rent is \$595 a month, plus gas and electric. I share that with a roommate. A bus pass costs \$37.50 a week and my phone bill is \$51 per month. When that is all paid I have nothing left.

"I work out in West Mifflin and live in Mount Oliver. I take two buses and it takes me nearly two hours to get to and home from work. I was making \$11.75 working at Target overnight, so I thought I was qualified for this job. I have experience with rating systems and stock.

"I wasted my time coming over here. They asked me to fill out a form and then I sat for 20 or 30 minutes. They said someone would get me but no one ever did. All they are doing is handing out an application you can access online, so I am going home and doing it from there."

Amazon has gained the reputation of operating modern day sweatshops. Workers are expected to work 10-12 hour shifts, constantly moving through the warehouse, climbing steps, and lifting heavy packages. Technology is used to monitor each employee's productivity and those that fall behind are fired.

The web site that describes the jobs offered tells applicants to "prepare for warp speed!" and that "Temperature in the fulfillment center may vary between 60 and 90 degrees, and will occasionally exceed 90 degrees."

Workers collapsing from the heat became so common at Amazon's warehouse in Allentown, Pennsylvania that management parked ambulances outside the center rather than take measures to keep the building cool. At other locations, management wears backpacks filled with Gatorade to revive exhausted workers.

Caleb Barnes, 21, is hoping to sell life insurance in the future but needs part-time work now. "I just got my license to sell insurance and now I need a car so I can start selling policies. I am hoping to work at Amazon long enough to afford a car.

"The job situation is kind of tough. Most people I know are having a hard time finding work. My mom is working part-time and last year our water got shut off. We were both working. Rents are going up, but wages aren't."

Pittsburgh is often presented as a model rustbelt city that has "remade itself" with high tech firms and a booming health care and higher education sector. Official unemployment is lower in Pittsburgh than many other rustbelt cities of the same size and there has been a building boom in downtown and some of the neighborhoods. However a closer look reveals that extreme poverty still exists in many neighborhoods of the city and especially in the surrounding small towns that made up the former steel mill and coal mining belt. Within Pittsburgh the new jobs have mainly been low wage, part-time and temporary and whole areas have simply been left out of the economic "development."

Official unemployment in Pittsburgh is 5.4 percent but unofficially it is much higher. The median

household income is below \$40,000 a year, over 20 percent below the state average. Nearly one in five live below the poverty level. The situation for minority workers is even worse. The Pittsburgh Regional Quality of Life Survey found that 36 percent of African Americans who were working earned less than \$25,000 a year.

Henry James Holmes, 55, worked for 15 years as a mechanic in California. “I’m a certified diesel mechanic. The company I work for is moving to Mexico and we are all losing our jobs. They gave all of us time off to look for work, so I decided to come back home to see what I can find.

“I left Pittsburgh in 1978. I came out of high school and worked with my dad at the Homestead steel mill for five years before they shut all the mills down. Then I said ‘to hell with it’ and moved out to California. I lived with my brother who was in the Marines until I got on my feet.”

Allen Hurt, 52, spoke about the challenges of finding work for people who have criminal records. “I’m having a hard time getting employment. When they ask if you had a criminal record I always say ‘yes’ because I don’t want to lie, but they never contact me for the job.

“I have been out of jail for six years but once they hear you have been in prison they just don’t want to hire you. They don’t ask me about it, they never let me explain what happened. You want to explain that this is past history, that it is part of my past, to prove that I am a better person.

“I am working part-time right now. It is just one week a month. It is not enough. I am seeking more and better employment. Working one week a month doesn’t meet your needs, you can’t pay your bills.”



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