

# Amazon worker attempts suicide at Seattle headquarters

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A distraught employee leaped off the rooftop of Amazon's Seattle, Washington headquarters in a suicide attempt Monday morning. The unidentified worker was hospitalized in critical condition after miraculously surviving the 12-story fall from the Apollo building, one of several structures at the South Lake Union campus where 20,000 employees of the online retail giant work.

Before trying to take his life, the worker sent an email seen by hundreds of co-workers and Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos criticizing the way the company handled his request to transfer to a different department, according to a person familiar with the situation who spoke to Bloomberg News.

The worker had recently put in the request but was placed on a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), a status that means likely termination in three months or less for not meeting work quotas and other company demands. In the email, the worker "hinted that he might harm himself," the person who asked not to be identified told Bloomberg.

Amazon officials would not reveal the content of the email and issued a cursory statement to the media, saying, "Our thoughts are with our colleague as he continues to recover. He's receiving some of the best care possible and we will be there to support him throughout the recovery process."

While many details are still unknown and conditions are relatively different, the tragedy cannot but remind one of the suicides of Chinese workers facing unbearable conditions at electronics manufacturing firm Foxconn. After an international furor following 14 deaths in 2010, the maker of Apple and Samsung phones installed netting and forced workers to sign pledges that they would not kill themselves.

Monday's event in Seattle sheds light on the realities of the "new economy" in the United States and the working conditions at Amazon, which employs 268,000 full- and

part-time employees worldwide and plans to hire another 120,000 temporary workers in the US for the holiday season.

"The suicide attempt is terrible," Michael Subit, an attorney in Seattle who has handled unfair termination cases brought by Amazon workers, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Certainly being put in the Performance Improvement Plan frequently leads to termination in a couple of months. Sometimes a worker succeeds, but more often than not they are let go."

"I am not a medical doctor, but for someone who has legally represented workers for 25 years I know that work is so fundamental to how workers define themselves. The prospect of losing their livelihoods also means the prospect of losing themselves, and it could trigger serious emotional responses from workplace violence to attempted suicide."

In 2015, Amazon reached \$100 billion in revenue for the first time, and it currently has a market capitalization of nearly \$300 billion. Company CEO Jeff Bezos has a net worth of \$66 billion and is number two on the Fortune 400 list for America's richest people. He added \$20 billion to his net worth over the 12 months through September 2016.

Bezos has championed the use of technology and data collection not only for determining the buying habits of consumers but also for imposing a relentless drive to sweat more output from warehouse workers, delivery drivers and office workers.

Conditions inside of Amazon's giant "fulfillment centers" are notorious, with "pickers" expected to pull 100 items or more per hour and walk more than 12 miles over the course of a shift to fill orders. The handheld scanners workers use to locate items in the warehouses allow managers to track precisely how long it takes to fill an order, with those failing to "make rate" subject to losing their jobs. In 2011 it was revealed that workers at

an eastern Pennsylvania center were working in 100-degree heat, with ambulances waiting outside to take away those collapsing from exhaustion.

In August 2015, the *New York Times* did an exposé of conditions facing developers, engineers, finance specialists and other office workers who regularly labor 80-85 hours a week and face cutthroat competition to retain their jobs and positions. In its offices, “Amazon uses a self-reinforcing set of management, data and psychological tools to spur its tens of thousands of white-collar employees to do more and more.”

“The company is running a continual performance improvement algorithm on its staff,” Amy Michaels, a former Kindle marketer, told the *Times*.

“Even many Amazonians who have worked on Wall Street and at start-ups say the workloads at the new South Lake Union campus can be extreme: marathon conference calls on Easter Sunday and Thanksgiving, criticism from bosses for spotty Internet access on vacation, and hours spent working at home most nights or weekends.”

Office workers are subjected to monthly “business reviews” where they are criticized for not meeting “team goals.” Workers are encouraged to use the “Anytime Feedback Tool” to inform on co-workers in comments only management reads. Because team members are ranked, and those at the bottom eliminated every year, “it is in everyone’s interest to outperform everyone else,” the *Times* reported.

Every year there is an Organizational Level Review where managers debate the rankings of their subordinates, assigning and reassigning names to boxes in a matrix projected on the wall also known as “stack ranking” or “rank and yank.” The newspaper noted, “As the hours pass, successive rounds of managers leave the room, knowing that those who remain will determine their fates.”

In addition to these annual cullings—referred to as “Purposeful Darwinism” by one former top Amazon human resource director—the company regularly threatens to terminate workers who take time off because of illness, pregnancy, caring for elderly parents or other pressing family needs.

“A woman who had breast cancer was told that she was put on a ‘performance improvement plan’—Amazon code for ‘you’re in danger of being fired’—because ‘difficulties’ in her ‘personal life’ had interfered with fulfilling her work goals,” the *Times* wrote. Another female worker who suffered a miscarriage was put on a PIP, telling the *Times*, “I had just experienced the most

devastating event in my life” only to be told her performance would be monitored “to make sure my focus stayed on my job.”

Subit said he is now working on a class action case brought by Amazon delivery drivers against the company and its subsidiaries. “This is a significant issue regarding the ‘Gig Economy,’ because the company is avoiding classifying its drivers as employees. The complaint charges that Amazon.com and Amazon Logistics are misclassifying drivers as ‘independent contractors’ so they don’t have to pay minimum wages and overtime.”

These conditions are not limited to the US. According to a BBC report, Amazon drivers in the United Kingdom are forced to speed, and some had to urinate or defecate in their trucks, in order to meet the company’s demanding delivery schedules.

Bezos, who also owns the *Washington Post*, wields significant political power. Last May he was a guest at the White House, where he joined the Obamas in announcing Amazon’s plan to hire 25,000 veterans and military spouses. A vocal critic of Donald Trump, Bezos quickly congratulated the Republican after the election, tweeting, “I for one give him my most open mind and wish him great success in his service to the country.”

Last week, a US District judge in Cincinnati ordered a halt to a strike by pilots for Air Transport Services Groups, which hauls packages for Amazon.com. Two hundred and fifty pilots struck November 22 to protest manpower shortages.

Granting ABX Air’s request for a temporary restraining order during Amazon’s peak sales period—from Thanksgiving through so-called Cyber Monday—US District Judge Timothy Black declared, “The public expects that purchases and shipments will be delivered in a timely fashion. Absent an injunction, ABX, its customers and the public will suffer immediate, irreparable harm. Imagine Christmas without Amazon!”



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