

“It’s sheer slavery”

Amazon warehouse worker in Manchester UK “enterprise zone” speaks of intolerable working conditions

Our reporters
19 May 2017

As the Amazon corporation grows exponentially, its distribution centres around the world have mushroomed in order to meet demand.

By the end of this year Amazon, with a market capitalisation of US \$430 billion, will have opened a further four distribution warehouses in the UK, bringing the total to 16. There are currently nine in England, two in Scotland and one in Wales.

Amazon’s warehousing operations have become a byword internationally for ultra-high levels of exploitation. Its largely minimum wage workforce endures demanding physical work.

A worker at Amazon’s Manchester operation spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the sweatshop conditions at the site. He spoke anonymously, due to the likelihood of reprisals from Amazon management:

“The wages are pathetic—£7.65 an hour and if you last out a year you get a pay increase of 10p an hour. Amazon could easily pay a half-decent wage to its workforce, because of the huge profits they make. The chief CEO [Jeff] Bezos earns billions. Why would anyone need billions? This kind of exploitation has been going on for decades by Nike and Adidas in Thailand, with their sweatshops.”

Last Christmas, the company’s UK operations attracted public outrage after revelations that Amazon workers at Dunfermline in Fife, Scotland were sleeping in tents near the facility. They told reporters they could not afford the travel costs from home to work.

The Dunfermline “fulfilment centre” is Amazon’s largest single site in the UK, the size of around 14 football pitches. Throughout the year, 1,500 staff work there up to 60 hours a week on the minimum wage—4,000 extra temporary workers are hired during the busy Christmas/New Year period.

The Amazon worker said, “At peak times, from halfway through November to January, overtime is compulsory,

which means an eleven-and-a-half hour day, five days a week.

“During peak periods, some poor devils who aren’t working hard enough just disappear. The job is very tiring; I keep falling asleep on my way home. I got carpal tunnel syndrome in my hand due to repetitive strain injury from the work—we just do the jobs the robots can’t do—it’s sheer slavery.

The worker described dictatorial conditions on the shop floor: “Discipline is very strict. If you’re sick and don’t phone in you get three penalty points, but if you’re absent and phone in sick, you get one point. You have to ring in every day of sickness, and you’re also penalised for being late.

In September 2016, Amazon opened a new fulfilment centre with over 1 million square feet of space over three floors near Manchester airport. The warehouse is located in a recently established “Enterprise Zone,” known as Airport City. The Zone offers five million square feet of development over 150 acres, including an “advanced manufacturing cluster.” Firms including Amazon and DHL employ over 20,000 workers at various sites.

Airport City was established in 2012—mainly through £800 million of Chinese investment—following the Conservative government’s launch of new Enterprise Zones. China is involved in a joint venture in Airport City, with the Beijing Construction Engineering Group (BCEG) taking a 20 percent equity stake in the project. BCEG is backed by the state-owned Industrial and Commercial Bank of China—the world’s largest bank.

Others in the joint venture are Carillion PLC and the Greater Manchester Pension Fund—with over £13 billion in assets in 2014. Manchester Airport Group is another investor, part owned by Labour Party-run Manchester City Council.

The council speaks of the development in glowing terms: “Airport City is designed to attract national and international enterprises that can take advantage of its location in the heart of the North West and the UK, along with the international connectivity provided by the airport.”

Speaking at Airport City on his state visit to the UK in 2015, China’s President Xi Jinping said, “Airport City Manchester is the first project to have materialised since our two countries signed an MoU [memorandum of understanding] on infrastructure cooperation in 2011. It is also the first major infrastructure project in the UK with the involvement of a Chinese company in the form of equity investment.”

There are now 24 Enterprise Zones in the UK, with a total of 48 planned. Like their counterparts in India and China, they offer corporations massive concessions, including tax and business rate breaks and the exploitation of a workforce often paid at the minimum wage rate of £7.65 an hour.

The Manchester Enterprise Zone advertises attractive terms for investors, including, “an accelerated planning system so that developments can happen quicker. By locating your business at Airport City Manchester, you can claim up to 100% Business Rates relief (worth up to £275,000) over a 5-year period.”

Around 1,500 staff work at Amazon in Airport City, with the firm employing up to 3,000 staff at peak times. The work is difficult, long, and closely monitored.

“I work a ten-and-a-half hour shift,” the worker explained to the WSWS. “This includes two paid 15 minute breaks and a half-hour unpaid dinner break. From leaving your workstation however it could take four minutes to get to the break room.

“I now do a different job, working in a cage; the pods come to you, then you have to pick the orders. I can’t speak to my workmate opposite because it would mean shouting above the noise. And you’re not allowed to sit down. To reach your target of 300 picks an hour you have to work fast all day, you can’t even daydream. You have two seconds to look at the screen, then you scan the item and pick it, nine seconds in all.”

Workers are forced to undergo a humiliating disciplinary program for the slightest infractions:

“If you fail to reach your target you undergo a five-step disciplinary—one supportive conversation, two counselling, three warnings, then the sack,” the worker said.

Despite these dictatorial policies, the company treats workers like cattle, forcing them to prove they deserve a full-time job with months of temporary work:

“When you start work at Amazon you are employed on a temporary basis by one of two agencies, which are housed in the warehouse. To get the job in the first place you have to

do a breath test for alcohol and a saliva test for drugs.

“The agencies are completely incompetent—they can’t sort your wages out. I heard that an agency worker didn’t get a day’s pay in November, and it took a month for them to sort it. They had to involve the shift manager and Human Resources to get it sorted.

“After three months’ probation, you may be made permanent, but if the agency make a mistake, and it wrongly appears you’ve had time off because they’ve missed paying you a day, you have to wait for the next round.

The worker expressed concern over Amazon’s expansion plans: “Amazon will be opening in London—how will workers survive there on the wages with high rent costs and travel?”

“What’s [Labour leader Jeremy] Corbyn doing about this?” The worker asked. “I heard him mention the living wage, but only in a half-hearted way.”

Conditions like those faced by this Amazon worker are common—hundreds of thousands labour under the Amazon dictatorship worldwide, in the US, China, Brazil, India, Germany, Japan, Mexico, France, and elsewhere.

In the UK, Amazon and a long list of major corporations can impose such conditions only due to the active collusion of the trade unions and Labour Party in destroying workers’ rights.

At the same time, successive governments have handed massive tax breaks and other concessions to big business. Amazon received £3.6 million in subsidies from the Scottish National Party government since 2007. It set up in Fife after being handed a taxpayer-funded grant from Scottish Enterprise, Scotland’s main economic development agency.

To all intents and purposes, Amazon operates as a law unto itself in the UK. In 2014, it paid just £9.8 million in tax on UK profits—despite its sales in Britain totalling £6.3 billion.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact