

Canadian Amazon workers face low wages and constant speed-up

Our reporters
1 July 2017

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team visited the Amazon fulfillment center in Brampton, a city not far from Toronto, Ontario, to distribute an announcement of the launch of the International Amazon Workers Voice newsletter. Our reporters spoke to several workers about their experiences with the corporation.

Amir is a young worker who has been at the Amazon fulfillment center for three weeks. “I find it sometimes very interesting and sometime uncomfortable,” he said. Like many younger workers at the facility, he is only there temporarily. “I am only here for one month, and then I’m going back to university,” he told us.

Mohammed has been working for 10 months at the center. “I was coaching before, but now I’m working on the floor and doing problem-solving. Right now, I’m making \$13.90 an hour, which is not enough to live on.”

He expressed hopes of securing a promotion, which would enable him to earn “\$6,000-\$7,000 per month plus bonuses.” Amazon is notorious for pressing workers to take increased workloads with the promise of bonuses, regardless of the toll this takes on their health and well-being.

Sadya, an immigrant worker, explained how the targets operate. “The targets always change too, usually its up—so we would start at 8, and then its 9, 10, and then we’re hitting 11 so we know we have to push more. Sometimes if you’re low they will shift guys from here to over there. I think it should be lower,” she said.

She went on to explain how extra work was a common occurrence. “They ask me for OT and sometimes there’s MOT too [mandatory overtime],” she added.

Several workers spoke about how a third party contractor, the staff management firm SMX, hires

people to work in the Amazon facility. SMX takes a cut of the workers’ wages, with the workers being kept in the dark as to how much Amazon is actually paying for their labour. “Amazon pays more and SMX pays us less, but I don’t know how much,” one worker said.

Mark, who was born in the Philippines, has worked at Amazon for four years and made his way to the top tier of the pay bracket, earning \$19 an hour. “I work 40 hours a week, but sometimes there’s overtime. A lot of workers come here for work, and they start with the agency, SMX, but I don’t know how that works.”

Brampton has a high immigrant population, with 2016 figures suggesting that 40 percent of its residents are of South Asian origin. The population has more than doubled since 1990, to more than 600,000.

Funding for social services has not kept pace with population growth. A recent report by the United Way of Peel Region noted that 17 percent of families in Peel Region, where Brampton is located, live in poverty. This means that more than 222,000 people in the region are not able to afford housing or food on a daily basis. Youth unemployment in Brampton is high, at 20 percent, and child poverty stands at 16 percent. The collapse in the manufacturing industry has left many people working part-time or contract positions, where wages are stagnant or fail to keep pace with rising prices for basic necessities.

Under such conditions, several workers expressed satisfaction that they had a job at all. Alina, who has been working in HR for the last seven months, said, “I enjoy my job. I don’t think of it as a life sentence so I’m trying to make it work.” Another worker added, “I’m 43 already—I have to think positive in my heart and mind you know?”

An older immigrant worker who had been working at the Amazon facility for a long time was particularly

dissatisfied with his plight and expressed a hope that a union could be established to help win better conditions.

While such sentiments are understandable given the brutal conditions of exploitation under which Amazon workers labour on a daily basis, the trade unions offer no way forward to fight back. Over the past three decades, they have transformed themselves into appendages of corporate management and the state, and forced through attacks on pay and working conditions on the workers they purport to represent. In places like Brampton and the surrounding areas, they have played a decisive role in the assault on what were once relatively well-paid and stable jobs in the manufacturing sector, including in auto.

The unions' avowed nationalism, under conditions of the globalization of production, has led to workers being played off against each other in a race to the bottom, as each union bureaucracy competes to attract investment by acting as a labour contractor for the global corporations.

Workers confront an international struggle, which at the globally active Amazon conglomerate is posed with extreme sharpness. This requires the adoption of a new perspective for political struggle, based on a decisive break with the trade unions and their political backers, the formation of independent action committees to take up the fight for better wages and working conditions, and the waging of a political struggle on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

The International Amazon Workers Voice was formed to bring such a perspective to Amazon workers around the world.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)