

“The company is a prison”

Fall River, Mass., Amazon worker says company forces workers to grab heavy pallets 50 feet in air

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Democratic Senators Ed Markey and Elizabeth Warren, prominent liberals, took part in the official opening on March 24 of Amazon’s fulfillment center in Southeast Massachusetts. Republican Governor Charlie Baker toured the plant with Markey. Warren, the phony defender of “Main Street America,” was photographed scanning the bar code on a box she’d packed “under the tutelage of” a worker to honor the opening of the plant. Markey told the *Providence Journal* that the plant is “a beacon of commerce and a hive of worker activity.”

In reality, the giant building is a “hive” of dangerous working conditions and poverty-level wages.

“The company is a prison,” one Fall River Amazon worker told the IAWV. “I was told to stop tagging machines for repairs because we cannot afford new wheels.”

He continued, “It’s a sweatshop. They use Raymond order-picking machines [small forklifts] to have humans remove heavy 60-pounds-plus pallets by hand in unsafe, twisting, jerking motions while raised 50 feet in the air. Even though they should not even use these machines for anything other than order picking for items, they use saws to cut the cages on the machine so that workers can use them for unintended purposes. They cut off one side to load pallets onto, and the cages are bending, jagged, and falling apart.

“Workers cut themselves on the edges, they pull muscles in their arms and back from pulling pallets by hand. It is horrible, and the managers laugh when you raise a concern for injury. They boast that our concerns are minimal and that we should not complain because

those of us that get to use the machinery are ‘lucky.’ ”

When it chose the location, which straddles the border of Fall River and Freetown, Amazon received nearly \$15 million in tax breaks from the two municipalities and the state. While this amount is small change compared to the hundreds of billions in taxes that Fortune 500 companies have stolen from states through gimmickry, the breaks for Amazon come at a time when Fall River is cutting essential services from its budget.

The tax breaks to Amazon include a \$1 million Job Creation Projects credit and a \$2.25 million Enhanced Expansion Project Credits from Massachusetts. To earn this amount of money at the starting wage of \$12.75, a full-time employee would need to work more than 120 years. The starting wage at Amazon’s fulfillment center is only slightly more than the \$11.65 per hour that would put a single worker at the federal poverty level.

The city of Fall River gave Amazon a property tax exemption of more than \$7.8 million, to be used over 15 years. Freetown gave a 15-year property tax exemption of more than \$3.8 million. Amazon likely will also get a federal tax benefit as it depreciates the \$54 million it spent on the building.

Representative Joseph Kennedy III crowed that these giveaways will “help spur additional private sector growth” in the area.

Fall River’s fiscal year 2016 budget included cuts of nearly \$1.4 million, blamed by the incoming mayor on a deficit his predecessor had left behind. Among the cuts was one of nearly 8 percent for the Fire

Department.

Massachusetts has more than 10 small cities that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were known internationally for their textiles (Lawrence, Haverhill, Lowell, and Fall River), shoe manufacturing (Brockton and Lynn), whaling and fishing (New Bedford), jewelry (Attleboro), paper (Holyoke), and other industries. Workers won a series of major strikes, including the 1912 Lawrence textile strike, where thousands of workers under the socialist leadership of Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn won a reduced workweek and a 20 percent wage increase.

After World War I, capitalists moved production first to the American south and then abroad, in search of cheaper labor and higher profits. Many of the Massachusetts cities they left behind—euphemistically called “Gateway Cities”—have still not recovered. According to US Census data, from 2010 to 2015, on average 23.2% of Fall River residents were living in poverty and the per capita income was less than \$22,000 per year.

“I will join the IAWV,” the Fall River Amazon worker said. “I would be classified as a conscious, militant worker, eager to make change. It feels good to know we can combat evil together.”



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