

# Virginia and Maryland Amazon workers denounce speed-ups as company profits from millions in government giveaways

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Amazon.com, Inc., which employs over 340,000 workers internationally, has become particularly entrenched within the Washington, D.C. - Baltimore region. As the mega-corporation rakes in billions of dollars from state and federal services, grants and tax breaks, thousands of its regional employees face grueling work conditions and low pay.

Amazon workers in the Washington and Baltimore area spoke to reporters from the *International Amazon Workers Voice* on conditions at their workplace and their communities.

“Last week, the level of ‘outbound’ work went up, and I am required to work 11-hour shifts,” said a Virginia worker to the IAWV under the condition of anonymity. “Sixty-hour work weeks, mandatory overtime [MOT]. There is lots of turnover in outbound and it’s not surprising due to the strenuous pace of work,” they said.

“The management often tells us that they can work with us if we are unable to do a mandatory overtime shift, but what that means is that they will move our MOT to a different day of the week.” The worker suspected this sort of manipulation would become increasingly regular, “because I’ve seen that we can become backed up quite easily.”

Last year it was announced that Amazon would be constructing a new 1 million-square-foot distribution center in Frederick County, Virginia. Virginia’s Democratic governor Terry McAuliffe touted the deal, declaring: “Virginia [was] selected for its business climate, infrastructure, strong workforce, and global competitiveness,” McAuliffe beamed.

That’s because the government gave Amazon millions of dollars for free. The company received a

“Major Business Facility Job Tax Credit”, as well as state funding and resources for employee training via the Virginia Jobs Investment Program. In nearby Fairfax County, a recently-announced data center will receive a \$7,000 economic development grant for each employee the new facility hires.

In the fulfillment centers that have been built, workers explain exhausting conditions: “Management at the factory has a tendency to micromanage and push rates a lot,” emphasizing that company bosses were “very big on rates.”

“The higher-ups in the company are the really ruthless ones,” the worker said. “Everyone is hired as a temp. After five months a worker will be graduated to full time, although at this facility that probation period can last for up to a year. At the end of that probation period, if you are kept on, you can obtain benefits such as health care.” The worker noted that the five month probation period was several months longer than the usual 90 days probation period given to workers at most businesses.

Reporters for the IAWV spoke to Amazon employees at a distribution center in Baltimore, Maryland. The 1 million-square-foot distribution center opened in 2015 after the city provided a whopping \$43 million in taxpayer handouts—what the government and companies call “incentives.” The facility is located on the same spot that was once occupied by a General Motors plant that had operated there since 1934 and at one time employed 7,000 workers. The plant was shuttered in 2005, eliminating over 1,100 jobs.

“Our rent is about \$1,300 a month,” stated an Amazon worker at the facility of his financial situation, adding “we paid rent, but didn’t pay the car payment

for August, September, or October. Once we got an eviction notice, we had to pay that bill. With the late fees, you've got to pay even more."

Today, the Amazon facility employs 3,000 people working in staggered 10-hour, four-day-a-week shifts, 24-hours a day. Workers are paid around \$12.50 as the facility moves as many as 12,500 packages in an hour. Many of the workers have to take on multiple jobs to make ends meet.

When asked for their thoughts about the *International Amazon Workers Voice*, the worker said "I'm glad you are reporting the conditions of workers at Amazon; there is a need for 'on-the-ground' exposures today."

"A lot of people my age are starting to see capitalism for what it is: a system where the wealth flows upward," the worker added.

In addition to logistics, food service and retail distribution centers, the Washington D.C. area is home to Amazon's internet cloud service. "Northern Virginia is one of the primary battlegrounds in the cloud war" between web technology giants Microsoft, Google, Oracle and Amazon, states *datacenterfrontier.com*. "It's of major strategic importance to Amazon Web Services (AWS), whose Amazon US East region spans more than 25 data centers across Loudoun and Prince William counties." Nearly 71 percent of AWS's total internet capacity, worth \$10 billion in yearly revenue, flows through its northern Virginia facilities.

A considerable portion of AWS's cloud goes to housing the web technology of US intelligence agencies. The Corporate Office Properties Trust, a firm which constructs the offices for numerous national security-related agencies, has leased over 1.3 million square feet of data center space to Amazon since 2013.



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