

Working life at a Pittsburgh Amazon warehouse

Samuel Davidson
10 August 2017

Workers at Amazon's Pittsburgh distribution center describe low wages and dictatorial working conditions in interviews with the *World Socialist Web Site*. The company that made billions in profits last year and received millions in tax breaks from the state pays the vast majority of its workers a poverty wage, with no health benefits and only part-time status.

Because of fear of losing their jobs, both employees asked to use pseudonyms.

"They don't care about us," said Janice. "All they care about is making money. Everyone is part-time, you can't get a full workweek and there is no health care. You can't make a life on this. I have bills, rent, car payment and utilities. How can you pay your bills on part-time work? We just work and the heads gets rich."

"Almost everyone there is part-time," explained Howard. "We work four-hour shifts, 10 to 2, 4 to 8, and there is a twilight shift of 4 to 8 in the morning. There may also be a graveyard shift, I'm not really sure."

The State of Pennsylvania has provided Amazon with millions in tax breaks. Last year, Governor Tom Wolf, a Democrat, granted the company another \$22.5 million in tax break with the promise that the company would build another fulfillment center. The company has 13 warehouses in the state and employs roughly 8,200 mostly part-time workers.

Outside of the Pittsburgh and Harrisburg warehouse, most of the others are along the eastern side of the state, supporting Washington, DC, Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York City.

In 2012, then-Governor Tom Corbett signed a deal with Amazon that it would start paying sales taxes, but forgave the company its 2011 sales tax obligation, saving Amazon more than \$350 million. Around the same time, Governor Corbett granted Shell Oil \$2.1

billion in tax breaks and incentives to build a natural gas plant while cutting \$500 million a year from K-12 public education.

"Almost everyone is part-time, even the shift managers," Howard continued. "So we are scheduled to get 20 hours a week, but it is usually 25 with the overtime, and sometimes you can pick up an extra shift, but no matter what, you will not get a full week's pay.

"It is never outwardly spoken, but it is likely to keep from having to provide health care. Even most management don't get health care. Only the very top people."

When Amazon opened the center in 2014, wages were \$10.50 an hour. Currently, the company is paying \$12.25 an hour for part-time work. Employees are only scheduled a 20-hour workweek but are often forced to work overtime. However, even if figuring a 30-hour week, a year-round employee would only earn at the very most \$18,375, just below the poverty level for a two-person household, and \$10,000 below the poverty level for a family of four.

"Our pay is \$12.25, \$12.50 or \$12.75 an hour," said Howard. "It's better than minimum wage, but when you don't work full time it is not really enough to live. And you certainly couldn't afford health care. Most people have to have roommates or second jobs just to be able to afford an apartment.

"But it is even hard to have a second job since they are always forcing you to work overtime and changing your shift. It is the inconsistency of it. The shifts are always being changed. Right now, we are on summer season, but they will shift the shifts in the fall. There is one worker who has been here two years, and she told me she has worked 11 different shifts."

The forced overtime and changing shifts are two of Howard's main concerns. The company doesn't

provide any vacation, personal or sick days. Instead, each employee is awarded 30 hours of what the company calls “unpaid time off” or UPTO. Every three months, you can earn another 20 hours.

When an employee needs time off, for any reason—illness, a doctor’s appointment, taking care of a sick child or family member, or wanting to take a vacation—he or she must use UPTO.

In addition, the company uses UPTO to force workers to work overtime without any warning and whenever needed.

“If you have a doctor’s appointment,” Howard explained. “If you are sick, if your kid is sick, you have to use your UPTO. If you want to go on vacation, you have to use your UPTO.

“There is also always forced overtime—it is very inconvenient, and if you can’t work the overtime, you lose that much UPTO. If the overtime is an hour, then you lose an hour UPTO.

“If you get down to zero, you get fired,” Howard said.

Even if you have a medical appointment and come in with a note from the doctor’s office, Howard explained, “you still have to use your UPTO. They even ask you when you are hired if you have a disability, but then you still get penalized for it. Many people are sharing rides, or taking buses, and either miss their ride or get penalized. The bus is a very big problem especially on the weekend or nights because they don’t run very often.

“There is no way to plan for it, they don’t come up to you at the beginning of your shift and ask or tell you that there is overtime. They don’t tell you at the beginning of your shift, which I think is obnoxious.

“It just depends how the shipments are coming and if everything has been sent out or not. You only leave when your boss comes around and tells you to go home.

“This is very hard on single parents who may have to pick up or meet their kids from day care or school. They just don’t care.”

The Pittsburgh facility is a distribution or sorting center, not a fulfillment center. “We get all our stuff from the fulfillment center in Lexington, Kentucky. It comes in completely boxed, labeled and wrapped. All we do is sort it, scan it and move it to different pallets that then go out to the post office for delivery.

“The boxes can range from under a few pounds to 150 pounds. If it is over 50 pounds, it will be labeled ‘team lift,’ meaning more that one person is needed to move it.”

In 2011, so many people were getting heat stroke at Amazon’s Allentown warehouse that the company hired an ambulance to be stationed outside the facility. Amazon claims to have resolved the heat problem, but in its current advertisement for the Pittsburgh job admits that “Temperature in the sort center may vary between 60 and 90 degrees, and will occasionally exceed 90 degrees.”

Howard’s biggest complaint is the way they treat the employees. “There is no conversation between the people who work there. They really discourage people from talking with one another. There is no sense of accomplishment, no conversing with one another. You are not supposed to talk, just supposed to work in this hive. That is what it looks like in there, a beehive, and we are working in a honeycomb.

“They don’t ever want to listen to the workers. There is a board where you are supposed to put suggestions, but nothing ever happens.

“Amazon is not unique. Long hours, crummy wages, this is every company.

“Not only Amazon but all these companies have the money, they could pay people a living wage and health care and still make out. The amount of greed is unheard of. I’m for doing something about it. The politicians are just for the wealthy. I support building a new party of the working class.”

Janice said, “All we hear is that the economy is getting better. But where are the jobs that pay a living wage? I have to work two jobs, and sometimes I pick up a third. How can you have a life like that? Trump is only for the rich. Things have got to change, it’s time everybody stood up together.”



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