

It's like an “early 1900s factory”

Walgreens pharmacy workers in Michigan speak out against harsh working conditions

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Workers at Walgreens’ Specialty Pharmacies throughout the country are facing increasingly harsh working conditions as profit margins from the company’s drug business decline. Walgreens, the second-largest pharmacy store chain in the United States, operates specialty pharmacies in many of its over 1,800 stores nationwide, processing prescriptions for complex medical conditions such as chemotherapy and AIDS.

Similar to the notorious Amazon fulfillment centers, the Walgreens Specialty Pharmacies are large distribution plants in which workers are expected to meet high packing and production standards for low hourly wages.

The pharmacies employ a wide array of workers—from pharmacists and pharmacy technicians, to packers and supervisors. Workers on the fulfillment team for Walgreens Specialty Pharmacies are a group of pharmacy technicians who are engaged in processing and packaging prescription orders for shipment. Pharmacy technicians receive prescriptions from the Walgreens call center, label, fill prescriptions and send them to pharmacists, who check the specificities of each prescription. At the end of the process, packers package prescriptions for shipping standards.

Fulfillment workers at a Michigan Walgreens Specialty Pharmacy recently spoke to WSWs reporters about their experience in the fulfillment center. They asked to remain anonymous for fear of losing their jobs.

Workers on the fulfillment team are among the most highly exploited. One worker explained that employees are often hired through recruitment offices who seek out people to work the fulfillment jobs at the lowest

possible rates. “All of the workers complete the same job,” the work said. “We are recruited by various outlets but are given different pay.” Temporary worker pay fluctuates from \$10 to \$15 per hour, while the pay scale for a permanent worker can range from \$16 to \$18 per hour. This creates a scenario in which two employees working side by side, performing the exact same job, could have a pay discrepancy as high as \$8 an hour.

Specialty pharmacy employees are placed into various stations designated by a particular drug and illness. Despite serious health concerns that come with handling many of these strong prescription drugs, workers are given only minor safety precautions. Those packing chemotherapy drugs, for example, are given only a pair of safety gloves and warning that if they are of childbearing age they must be wary.

Conditions in the filling center are very stressful. The management staff pushes the mantra of “working as a team,” while simultaneously promoting competition between the workers and enforcing strict rules to prevent fraternization. “We are constantly in competition with each other on the floor packing and making sure we fill more prescriptions than others and discouraged to work with one another,” one worker said.

Those who do not question the status quo are targeted for positions in management, regardless of productivity. Workers report that those who protest conditions or question company policy come under fire from management. “Some of us who question the procedures are given less of a chance at raises or promotions or full-time employment,” one worker noted. “When we pose questions to each other we are

constantly warned by management about how it's counterproductive. It seems like they want us to simply work methodically and mechanically."

Like workers at Amazon's fulfillment centers, Walgreens workers are expected to stay silent and work quickly and accurately. "When there's a question for our managers to help us be more productive it is hard to contact them. But when we ask the rest of our fulfillment team [our coworkers] on the floor we get notified by management for talking too much and are emailed for time wasted. In one of our meetings someone asked about our inconsistent production methods and the supervisor rejected her question and said the meeting only had a few minutes."

Workers complain about the high stress levels caused by the unrealistic production demands as well as constant surveillance by management. "Constantly [the manager] is watching us by pretending to help people or watching the cameras," one said. "Then we are expected to go to meetings to discuss our low production when we are packing higher than our goals. Right before lunch and other breaks they talk about how more managers are going to come in. Not only are we watched, but at the start of the day we are sent discouraging emails. An email comes in by management in the morning saying it is going to be a tough day, then we work 10 hours."

Fulfillment workers are often personally blamed for mistakes that are the outcome of the pressure to perform their tasks as quickly as possible: "If any employee makes mistakes we are personally berated. Then later we are publicly berated as a team by management."

Employees on the fulfillment team often work very long hours. "We have mandatory overtime for the next month, most likely through September," explained one worker. "If we have a sick day or try to take a day off we are sternly rejected or are called by our recruiters or management that we will be terminated if we take too many days."

According to another worker, attendance policy is particularly draconian. Days off must be scheduled well in advance and can be rejected by management, personal days included. "We are mandated to work 10 hours plus," the worker said. "If we call off due to illness, and the days are three consecutive days, we are given three points towards our attendance. If the days

are not consecutive we will be given six and then be terminated."

After difficult 10-plus hour shifts, employees are constantly called by recruiters or management to warn the workers about their attendance. The overall scheduling policy is promoted by management in meetings as a flexible way for workers to take advantage of their employment.

Despite numerous requests from workers for more working space at their stations and more supplies, they are often left to work in cramped areas with few resources. Response from Walgreens has instead been to hire more managers to oversee the workers.

Many other workers approached by WSWS reporters declined to be interviewed, noting that they feared being reprimanded or fired for speaking out, a fear shared as well by all of the workers who volunteered their interviews. The employees who spoke to the WSWS all shared disgust of the working conditions as well as frustration with management. One compared the strategy of constant surveillance to an "early 1900s factory."

Some of the most draconian working conditions for fulfillment team workers were implemented following the launching of a massive "cost-cutting" plan announced in 2015, which aimed to cut \$1.5 billion in costs by the end of fiscal year 2017. Walgreens, which reported \$117.4 billion in global revenue last year, has historically earned about two-thirds of its US sales from prescription drugs sold at the pharmacy counter in the back of its stores.

Profits from the prescription drugs have experienced a significant decline due to a steady reduction in reimbursements from private insurance companies and the government, which pays for Medicaid and Medicare prescriptions.



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