

It's the most exhausting time of the year: Amazon, UPS workers denounce grueling holiday conditions

Our reporters
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The *International Amazon Workers Voice* spoke with delivery and warehouse workers at Amazon and UPS locations across the US this week amid reports of deaths at both companies. Workers at Amazon, UPS, FedEx, US Postal Service, and other logistics and delivery companies have been under immense pressure to meet increased demand during the Christmas holiday.

Bad weather and infrastructure problems created delays in Atlanta, Memphis and other cities, increasing the pressure on workers to catch up to promised delivery times. Workers describe a chaotic and often dangerous atmosphere in warehouses across the country.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported on Christmas eve that, in addition to its usual “ready teams” of office workers who volunteer to handle packages on a seasonal basis, UPS had also pulled its accountants, marketers and other office staff to make deliveries with some using their personal vehicles.

UPS has reportedly hired 95,000 seasonal workers this year. FedEx hired about 50,000, and Amazon 120,000.

Early in December, UPS announced a change to driver schedules from the federal Department of Transportation’s commercial driver schedule of 60 hours worked in a seven-day work week, to 70 hours within eight days, before a driver may take 34 hours off uninterrupted. This undoubtedly results in fatigued workers on the roadways, driving under dangerous snow and ice conditions.

Two Amazon workers in Sacramento spoke to *International Amazon Workers Voice* on condition of anonymity. Workers at this plant, where a worker recently became sick on the job and died a day later, brought a class action suit last month against the company for violations of legal working conditions, and complain of little or no time to sit down, eat a meal, or use the toilet.

One worker said, “Peak season has been bad. We’ve had some 12-hour shifts. You only get a 30-minute lunch. It’s not really clean in the department where I work. There’s a lot of dust, so throughout the shift you’re inhaling all this particulate matter.”

“They time you throughout the shift. They want you to pull, pack and send out a package within 44 seconds. Sometimes you have a lot of items, so you’re rushing yourself.”

Another worker explained, “The breaks are not long enough, and during peak season they need to be longer, especially if you’re working more than 10 hours. That way it doesn’t stress on the body. The way it works is you clock out at your station, then start

walking to the break room, and they count walk time as part of your break. It depends on where you are in the building, but it’s pretty massive, so it usually takes 5-7 minutes to walk to the nearest break room. 10 minutes is not enough time to even go to the break room and back. There’s a sitting area by the bathroom, so I usually just sit there instead.”

Maria, a 46-year-old fulfillment center worker in Newark, California also spoke with IAWV.

“It’s very hard work for very low pay. They do expect output from you and they will remind you or check your scan rate. They have standards and you do have to meet them, period. They do try to make sure that you do that.

“You really do have to cross your T’s and dot your I’s, because it’s easy to get hurt. I’ve tripped a few times already while at work over pallets. It feels cramped sometimes, and there are a lot of people. There’s no personal space whatsoever. When you turn around, often there’s a person right behind you. They do a lot of new hires.”

“You have the option not to do Voluntary Extra Time (VET) hours, but of course people are gonna do it, including myself, because the [usual] hours are funky and the pay is not good. It’s all a Catch-22. I’m sure they know this and people are gonna go for as many hours as they can. It’s hard.”

“They’re very stringent with their hours, and how much you can and cannot get. You can be penalized if you don’t follow their strict guidelines on hours. They have all this terminology, and I think it’s there to confuse people.”

When asked her thoughts on Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos being named by *Forbes* the richest person in the world, worth \$100 billion, she said, “I have never heard of someone making such an exorbitant amount of money in my life. To say that this guy is worth that. It’s almost make believe, it’s almost sickening. Our working conditions, hours and pay could be way better. There’s no reason it should be this way. We move the economy, if it wasn’t for us he wouldn’t have as much money as he does.

“What annoys me is that they get on you with the moving and the scan rate. I’m not robotic, some days I get fatigued, some days are hit or miss.”

The IAWV asked Maria if she is able to support herself and her family from what she earns at Amazon: “No, absolutely not. I was going to school, and that finished, so I got this job to make some

money. But the hours aren't there and the pay is not there. There's nothing there. I realize that this is a dead-end job."

"A lot of people cannot live and support themselves in the [San Francisco-Oakland] Bay Area without a roommate, without a significant other. It's very hard to pay rent, it's very hard to pay for food to eat. I have two kids, my son is grown and my daughter is 10 years old, and it's very difficult."

"There's no middle class anymore, it's either you're rich or you're poor. And I consider myself, along with many people, part of the working poor. People don't get paid enough, don't get enough hours of work, are not getting sufficient benefits to be able to sustain anything really. There isn't that middle ground anymore."

Newark is on the southern end of the San Francisco Bay Area of California. In the region, wealth inequality has also taken on grotesque proportions. Software technology, insurance and logistics companies like Google, Oracle, Logitech, Hewlett Packard, Cisco, Kaiser Permanente and UPS are among the largest employers. Richly compensated executives and tech industry professionals share a city with millions of middle-income and poor workers, as well as more than 4,500 homeless people, whose sleeping bags and tents line the same streets where one can find cash machines dispensing crypto-currencies. There is an extreme shortage of housing, and home prices and rents have skyrocketed. As of this year, the median home price in the Bay Area is estimated at \$895,000.

Amazon rents warehouse space for its various delivery services, and the waste from its grocery delivery service is relied on by the hungry and homeless for subsistence. *Guardian* reported on the death one year ago of Frank Ryan, a homeless man in his mid-50s, who was discovered dead in one of the dumpsters by another man diving for food. In recent days, Amazon announced it would open a homeless shelter in a Seattle location.

Thor, a Minneapolis-area UPS worker, spoke to the WSWs earlier this week about the lack of breaks and injury dangers on the job.

He said, "There are definitely speed ups. Just yesterday, I worked a full, 8-hour shift and only got one ten-minute break, but that's how it usually is."

He added, "You always hear about some guy who smashed his hand or his head, but the company doesn't report it. On top of that, they [the workers] never want to report it themselves, because if they do, they just get sent home and lose the rest of their pay for the day."

Amazon has built its fulfillment centers and expanded its workforce in areas hit hard by deindustrialization and recession, demanding maximum scheduling flexibility and imposing mandatory overtime on its fulfillment workers.

Joe, a former machinist and Amazon fulfillment center worker in southern Wisconsin, spoke to the WSWs about the conditions in the plant, and how Amazon has taken advantage of the Great Depression-like conditions in southeastern Wisconsin to maintain a cheap and pliant workforce.

Speaking about an average day, he said, "By the end everyone is drained. Most full-time workers work 60 hours a week and mandatory overtime. There is a lot of overtime, that's one thing

that is good about this job. But it's really draining and it takes you away from your family. Working 11 hours a day, when you have your first day off, you just sleep because you are so tired.

"There aren't a lot of happy people here. Most people are transitioning to something better, waiting their year out so they can go to school, and then they are outta here. You got some people that want to move up but, like every job they have here, there are cliques, so they pick and choose [who gets to advance]."

Referring to the wages of previous decades he recalled, "When I was kid, my brother dropped out of school and was able to find a job that paid \$28 an hour. Now, with all the factories moving out, the same thing happened in Kenosha, they've managed to recover just a bit over the years.

"With the closure of the Chrysler plant, things got really bad. It's why we've got so many people coming from all over, from Chicago to Milwaukee. Everywhere in between. Everybody works overtime so they can take care of their families. Otherwise, if they had something better to do or go to, they would."

Kenosha, now a city of about 100,000, once employed tens of thousands of autoworkers. Amazon is now its largest employer, with 3,000 workers. Earlier this year, President Donald Trump staged at local manufacturer Snap-On Tools, to propose his reactionary "Buy American, Hire American" policy. The job losses and cuts to services in the region have been so deep, wages are now low enough to attract Taiwan's Foxconn, the largest technology manufacturing contractor in the world. Foxconn will be constructing a 20-million-square-foot factory in southeastern Wisconsin that the company says may employ up to 13,000 workers. The holiday struggles of hundreds of thousands of logistics and shipping workers are increasingly becoming the norm.



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