

Following IAWV exposure at Texas warehouse

# More Amazon workers speak out against atrocious working conditions

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Following the *International Amazon Worker's Voice* exposure of working conditions at Amazon's DFW-7 warehouse in Haslet, Texas, many more Amazon workers have come forward to confirm widespread resentment against the outrageous working conditions described by whistleblower Shannon Allen.

When Chardé, a former Amazon worker at BOS-7 in Massachusetts, read about the abuses at DFW-7 on the *World Socialist Web Site*, she realized that her experiences were shared by Amazon workers around the world: "I just really thought it might have been the town that I was in, but apparently not."

When Amazon warehouses open, they target economically devastated areas with low incomes and high unemployment rates. Tax incentives are typically extorted from local governments. The company draws workers with promises of flexible hours, career opportunities, and even stocks and health care. Many workers shared stories of being attracted to Amazon by the pay and promises of stability—but then being injured, fired or driven to quit by the dangerous and strenuous conditions.

Chardé talked about the social conditions in her hometown, where Amazon chose to build its warehouse: "The building was launched in 2016, in Fall River, Massachusetts. Fall River is a small mill town. A lot of people are functioning drug addicts, alcoholics. I moved there because the rent is cheap, but it cost in other ways." Like many towns in America, Fall River suffered social and economic devastation through waves of deindustrialization as manufacturers relocated in pursuit of cheap labor, beginning in the 1950s and accelerating in the 1980s and 90s. Chardé continued: "A lot of the mills and other things had closed down. It was a big factory town, and people who had worked at the factories for years, they're getting fired and they're getting laid off."

Michael Yevtuck, a life-long construction worker and semi-retired house-builder from Cliffwood Beach, New Jersey, applied to work at Amazon's EWR-4 warehouse for similar reasons. "I figured I'd get some extra money because I wasn't doing anything, and I wanted to get back to work. You look at all these other low-paying jobs and it was already like October, and Amazon would just immediately hire you."

Yevtuck needed to work in order to have a chance at retirement and to provide for his son's wedding: "I was going to work through that for the extra money and then I was going to work my way back into the regular work system to make some more money for my old age. So I went there, applied and immediately was hired. I was thrilled—I figured \$800 a week, I could use that." Alex, who works at DFW-7, applied to work for Amazon because she needed the money in order to provide for her family: "I started at Taco Bell—I'd always done retail when I was younger. And when I heard Amazon was hiring I thought it would be a good time to apply, that it would be a good opportunity for me."

When Chardé was hired in Fall River, her first child was 4-years-old,

and she expected to be given some flexibility to accommodate her needs as a single mother. But when she was hired, she was given 60-hour weeks instead of the 40-hour weeks that she was promised. "They open the building, and they're shuffling thousands of people through the building—they hired like 2,000 people in the first month." A week after she was hired, she was told: "You're on 60-hour a week shifts until further notice." She worked 60-hour a week shifts for the next nine months. "I didn't get a break. My four year old thought that I lived at Amazon."

"They were just selling you a bunch of dreams," Chardé said, "and it turns out to be a lot of false fluff just to get a mass amount of people to be hired." Alex confirmed the sight of ambulances arriving at DFW-7 during the summer to pick up workers who had dropped from the heat, a fact previously exposed by the *World Socialist Web Site*. She said that workers get injured "probably once a day" and that high temperatures are common in the non-climate-controlled half of the warehouse. "We used to have fans, but they took them away, I have no idea why. There are a lot of people getting heatstroke. Last summer I don't think it was as bad as it is this summer—we did have more fans then."

She also confirmed that workers can often be seen sleeping in their cars in the parking lot.

Chardé described how management employs informants and spies among the workforce. She recounted how a worker who suggested in a small group that they should "get a union going" was fired the next day. "Everybody always has to watch what they say ... it's Orwellian," she said. Alex, also a problem-solver, confirmed this practice.

After Amazon workers finish their training, they are soon introduced to the infamous rate system that is integral to the company's huge profits.

Michael described how the rate system is used to whip workers to work faster as well as to provide pretexts for firing workers who find themselves in management's crosshairs. He was hired as a "stower." Stowers receive items as they are delivered to the warehouse, scan them and place them in the "pods" where they are stored. The speed with which stowers are required to scan and place items is the "rate," which is between 300 and 600 items per hour. If workers fail to make rate, they are harassed by management, "written up," and if they're "written up" a certain number of times they're fired. Workers can also be written-up for any "time off task," dropped items and miscounted items. According to Michael, rate requirements are often impossible to meet because the items to be picked, counted, or stowed vary in size. "You could easily do 500, 600, 1000 computer parts an hour no problem. When you give me 600 or even 200 or 150 weird items that don't fit on every pod it takes time to go up and down."

The frantic rates of speed are exhausting as well as dangerous: "That means you're doing 300 to 400 squats an hour or going up and down the

two-step ladder three to four hundred times—you don't even see that in an exercise class. If you're doing 300 squats an hour and you're working for 10 hours, you're doing 3,000 squats and it gets ridiculous—of course somebody's going to get hurt."

Workers are under immense pressure from management to work as quickly as possible without taking even momentary breaks: "If the pocket goes by and has space, then you're standing there for a second and you have to make up the time again. Meanwhile, the people in charge actually come around, start conversations with you, and then when you get your report for what you did that hour there's time off task."

Alex at DFW-7 confirmed the fear of being penalized for small mistakes, as well as the practice of firing workers who are injured. She described how a worker dropped an item and was injured while reaching for it: "The first thing they did was review the footage and he got fired the same day. So people feel like they can't go to Amcare." Amcare is Amazon's "in-house" medical care provider. Workers are told not to call 9-1-1 and to visit Amcare instead. Workers described how Amcare's main function appears to be to generate a pro-management paper trail that can be used to deny liability for injuries.

In addition to strict punishments for small errors, workers are subjected to searches when entering the lunch room and when leaving the warehouse. Phones are confiscated when workers enter the warehouse. "It's not safety for us, it's for them," said Alex.

At BOS-7, Chardé witnessed an injury when her co-worker tore her rotator cuff lifting heavy, odd-size items in the "rainbow aisle"—"which is the big awkward items: Playskool cars, stuff like that." After the co-worker went on disability, she contacted Chardé and confided, "they keep trying to fight me. One of the building managers kept saying it was a pre-existing condition—I've never hurt my arm before."

When the co-worker finally received compensation for her injury, she was subjected to retaliation. Chardé continues, "Then they would play games about her coming back, so she was out of work for about two months, and she had two small children. When she was finally allowed back, what do they do? They throw her right back in the rainbow aisle, where she currently works."

Michael tore both menisci in his knees trying to make rate and appealed to his supervisors to give him long-term, light-duty work while he recovered. He often visited the HR office to file requests for medical treatment, as well as injury reports. When workers pursue medical treatment for their injuries, Michael described how the company tries to get workers to settle their claims for \$2,500. It is worth noting that Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos has made around \$2,950 *per second* so far this year.

Every single injury story that workers have shared with the *International Amazon Workers' Voice* as this article was being prepared—together with many posts on social media responding to our coverage—shared a common feature: management's response. After being injured, workers are taken into interrogation sessions, without an attorney present, where management tries to browbeat and manipulate workers to admit to pre-existing conditions, to sign away their rights, to "settle" their claims for trifling amounts, and to sign non-disclosure agreements that gag workers from speaking out. "There are so many people that sign that piece of paper and don't speak up, and don't talk about being pressured to sign it," Michael said.

While in the HR office, Michael spoke with a young Somali immigrant who had injured his back. He described how HR representatives protected the company from liability by talking the immigrant into changing his story "saying he did sports before, and they were talking nice, and then they said 'Well, I'm sure you hurt your back in the past playing soccer or something.' And he would say no."

The interrogation continued: "But they just kept it up with the same questions, and eventually he goes 'Well yeah, I might have hurt it playing

soccer'—and you could tell that he was just going along with them." Due to his immigration status, Michael says, "He was scared. I think he was in the country all by himself, and he needed a job and was worried about his visa, so he signed the paper." The young man was then thrown out of the warehouse: "As soon as he signed the paper, they said 'Can we have your tags?'—that was the end of him. They took his tags, told him they'd be in touch, and showed him the door." Regarding injured workers' requests for light duty, Chardé said, "When the doctor gives you a notice and says you should be put on light duty, they don't want to do that. They want to be able to use you as a worker wherever they want you. They don't care."

Chardé was targeted by management after becoming pregnant, a fact she tried to keep secret. Previously, she had clashed with management and HR after reporting how a male stower, emboldened by Trump's behavior in the 2016 elections, was sexually harassing her and other female workers.

A floor manager had tried to help Chardé use some of her break time while she suffered from morning sickness, and "a lot of people told me I might not want to say anything." When management found out, they changed her job function from a "problem-solver"—which requires walking the warehouse and monitoring inventory, rates and damaged items—to a stower and pit machine operator, a much more dangerous and strenuous position. Chardé worked in the new position for weeks, all while petitioning management and HR to assign her to another role. She asked them, "Why am I doing this? Why is this my job function? And when I would go to my supervisors they would tell me to talk to HR."

She grew afraid of getting injured. "I'm 40 feet in the air, lifting boxes up to 50 lbs, and putting them into bins. And it's getting to be April, and May, and I'm getting to be two and three months pregnant. I'm like, I can't do this—you also have to wear a harness that goes around your abdomen, and I could kill my baby if I fell or if anything happened."

When she went back to speak with HR, they pressured her to take unpaid medical leave. "HR would say 'Oh, do you want to go home?' and they would pull out a packet and say 'You can take a medical leave and be pregnant.' One lady told me I had to sign the paper to take a medical leave and go. I said there's nowhere in your contract that I signed saying that if I became pregnant or had to be a problem-solver that I should be going on medical leave, or that I couldn't get pregnant or I couldn't get injured."

After she petitioned HR to change her job function, she was assigned to scraping safety tape from the warehouse floor. After a week of scraping tape, she asked for four hours of leave to go to a doctor's appointment to find out the sex of her baby. When she returned from her appointment, she found management had accused her of skipping work: "They're calling me, saying that I've done a no-call no-show. And then they send me a letter saying that I'm in violation of their contract because I went negative in my time."

After that: "I got my termination letter. And then they didn't even want to send me my last check."

Alex, at DFW-7, was injured by a PA—an assistant manager—who hit her with a pallet lift. "She hit me with the force of her pallet full of stuff—and pallets can weigh up to 300-600 pounds—and all that weight went into my shoulder, and it hurt."

After being sent back to work by Amcare, she worked until she could no longer stand the pain, and lobbied HR to review the footage of the incident, which they refused to do. Alex had to take a week of unpaid time off to receive medical attention for her shoulder, which turned out to have a pinched nerve. The PA's safety violation was never investigated. "They hurt us and then they don't want to pay us. My shoulder has never been the same," Alex said. As Chardé puts it, "once somebody gets hurt," they have three options: "leave your job, roll over, or just fight them tooth and nail." Workers who are injured and do not accept the pittance offered by Amazon as "buyouts" face the Kafkaesque, pro-management maze of America's workers' compensation courts, which drag out claims for

months and years.

Jeff Smith, a former Amazon worker who was injured at TPA-2 in Florida, described the pressure to settle out of court for pennies on the dollar. “I have a wife, a three-and-a-half-year-old and another one on the way in October and we cannot afford to live without any income ... I’m having trouble finding new work due to recovering still.”

Michael is one of the few workers who pressed ahead with his claim in workers’ compensation court. He was injured in 2015, but his insurance claim was denied despite every doctor agreeing that his knee injuries were work-related. The trial still has not taken place. “They want to give you 5 percent of what’s wrong, they want to put it to the lowest price that they can find, and they don’t want to give you lost wages. Amazon is hell and they get away with it because of the workers’ comp system.”

In Fall River, Chardé said, the joke about BOS-7 is that “everybody in Fall River is going to have worked at Amazon by the time the year is out.” When BOS-7 opened, Chardé had just been hired as a “problem-solver.” As part of the job, she had access to a system that catalogs and tracks each worker’s rates, as well as their role and status at the warehouse. Problem-solvers “make sure people who have been fired don’t have access to their badges or the computers.”

To direct problem-solvers to delete fired workers’ credentials, management would “send emails every day,” to Chardé, “and there would be like 800 people on one list—and we’re talking once a month.” Amazon compensates for these mass firings with a new round of hirings, placing ads for employees, according to Chardé, as far as Providence, Rhode Island.

The BOS-7 warehouse staged its grand-opening in September, 2016. In attendance were Fall River’s mayor, as well as Charlie Baker, the governor of Massachusetts, and “progressive” Senator Elizabeth Warren. Their speeches, as well as those of the warehouse’s managers, celebrated the number of jobs Amazon had brought to the area, and were uncritically reported by the *Boston Globe*. Listening to the speeches, Chardé thought, “The governor and senator are standing around smiling—why don’t you tell the truth and say that you just fired 800 people?”

The next year, when the *New York Times* and Democratic Party began the #MeToo campaign, Chardé described wanting to email Elizabeth Warren and say, “It’s a lot of lip service. You’re sitting there smiling and waving at the cameras, and in the meantime I was getting sexually harassed at this place.”

“I want to vote Trump out of office in November, but do I really want to vote Democrat? They’re so complicit—they’ve caused these issues too.”

*Do you have a similar story you want to share? Contact the International Amazon Workers Voice now and alert your fellow workers. We respect anonymity.*



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