

Amazon Prime Day produces 209 percent increase in UK health and safety complaints

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Intense workloads during online conglomerate Amazon's Prime Day last month resulted in a 209 percent increase in health and safety complaints from the company's British workforce.

According to the *Wired* website, campaign group Organise, which collates email complaints, reported Amazon workers wrote in complaining of stomach cramps, sprains, backache, musculoskeletal injuries and swollen feet.

Prime Day saw strikes at Amazon warehouses in Germany and Spain and a work to rule in Poland.

One worker in Britain reported, "It was worst in picking—we were picking items and sending them to customers faster than fast. In my opinion targets are not touchable any more. We have to break rules about health and safety to meet them."

She continued, "Almost all employees have problems with productivity and back pain."

Figures released earlier this year show that in three years, 600 health emergencies required paramedics and ambulance attendance at Amazon's 14 UK-based distribution centres. In over half, the patient was taken to hospital. The statistics were compiled by the GMB trade union, based on Freedom of Information requests submitted to local health authorities.

Amazon employs around 27,000 workers in the UK. Of these, two thirds work in its logistics and distribution operation. Globally, the company employs 563,100 as of April this year, up from 541,900 last year.

Of the 600 or so British emergency cases, according to figures provided by the West Midlands Ambulance Trust, 115 took place at the company's depot in Rugely, Staffordshire. The Rugely emergency callouts included: 14 cases of breathing problems; 24 cases of chest pain; another 18 of cardiac pain; five cases of fitting and another of convulsions; 13 cases of trauma, including three major traumas. Eight patients were unconscious.

Another three cases related to maternity and pregnancy. The GMB trade union collated comments from Amazon workers on the Rugely site.

One woman, working as a picker, reported, "When I found I was pregnant, I asked my manager to be transferred to a different department. I was told I could not be transferred and must continue picking, which involves bending, stretching and moving a heavy cart, and walking miles."

Another woman in late pregnancy reported being forced to stand during her entire shift.

Other workers reported depression, feeling like a "trapped animal," being treated "as if you are a robot" and "living in a prison."

One described how, "People are overtired due to constantly being rushed and threatened or being fined if they won't improve their performance. Stress level is high. They ask people why they were late 40 sec[onds]."

Amazon's fulfilment centres tend to be built in former industrial areas, where tens and hundreds of thousands of jobs have been destroyed. Rugely opened in 2011 on the site of the former Lea Hall Colliery. Part of the huge Cannock Chase coalfield, Lea Hall was opened in 1960 to provide coal for two adjacent power stations.

During the 1984-85 miners' strike, the pit was one of the first to see mass picketing. The strike, in defence of hundreds of thousands of jobs and an entire industry, was defeated because of the treachery of the trade unions and Labour Party that left the miners to stand alone against government-orchestrated police violence and strike breaking.

Lea Hall was closed five years after the end of the strike, in 1990, with the loss of 2,000 jobs in a town with a population of only 22,000. Nearby Littleton Colliery finally closed in 1993. Both the adjacent power stations have subsequently closed, leaving Amazon and a nearby Tesco distribution centre as the major employers.

The Rugby facility is only one of around 200 Amazon operates globally, each one employing hundreds or thousands of workers. Every day around the world, tens of thousands of Amazon workers walk 10 or 15 miles per shift, carrying out thousands of bending and packing movements. Every Amazon warehouse monitors workers closely, cajoles and warns them, under threat of discipline or dismissal, to fulfil targets.

Amazon is more than a gigantic online retail and distribution outfit. Increasingly its vast profits—\$2.53 billion (£1.9 billion) in the three months to the end of June this year on sales of \$52.9 billion (£41.3 billion)—come from the company’s move to monopolising infrastructure services for online commerce.

Amazon’s own web sites are the dominant platform for online sales of third party products. Amazon Web Services hosts 44 percent of the world’s cloud computing and data storage capacity, including that of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The company is also moving into corporate services and ecommerce, offering business products from office supplies to power tools, along with services such as invoicing, VAT-exclusive pricing, purchase tracking and business analysis. Its Amazon Business site claims to offer 250 million products. According to the *Financial Times*, the company’s UK Business arm signed up 100,000 customers in one year, seeking to emulate its development in the US where revenue reached \$1 billion within one year.

Amazon Business is also targeting public services in Britain. A recent five-year deal with the joint procurement group Yorkshire Purchasing Organisation (YPO), which organises bulk purchases for 13 local authorities, is reported as being worth £600 million. YPO claims a customer base of “more than 30,000 schools, universities, local authorities, social service providers and other non-profit making organisations.”

Under the terms of the deal, Amazon Business will supply all the goods, such as office supplies and medical equipment, required by these organisations via a “one-stop” site. According to the *Telegraph*, Amazon was the only bidder and the only “viable contractor” for the contract. Similar deals have been signed in the US with purchasing group US Communities.

But while Amazon expands its operations and profits worldwide, the company’s tax bill is falling. The company’s UK-based subsidiary earned £72 million last year in profits on a turnover of over £2 billion but paid a mere £1.7 million in taxes. The tax bill fell precisely

because of the rocketing price of Amazon shares under the rules governing share awards to company staff. Across Europe, Amazon’s tax bill was a mere €54.8 million on revenues of €24.9 billion.

Over the same period, Amazon CEO and founder Jeff Bezos increased his *personal* wealth by \$50 billion, to \$150 billion.

Amazon’s business extends around the globe, exploiting production, distribution and IT workers wherever it sees fit, shifting funds to wherever the tax burden is the least. Its operations demonstrate the immense capacity of modern society to organise production and distribution globally. But under capitalism, the allocation of these vast resources is devoted not to resolving human need, but to expanding the obscene riches of Bezos and his ilk.

This vast wealth must be expropriated and used to improving workers’ wages and living standards and addressing vital social needs worldwide. But trade unions, such as the GMB, call only the occasional, localised and restricted protests. They posture as friends of Amazon’s brutally exploited workforce, while working to establish a working relationship with Amazon management. Amazon workers urgently need new, internationally based rank-and-file organisations to unite their struggles.

We urge Amazon workers to contact the International Amazon’s Workers Voice to express their grievances and address the issues they currently face. Contact the International Amazon Workers Voice now and alert your fellow workers. We respect anonymity.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact