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Amazon Nightmare: Grandmother injured on the job goes homeless, suffers pneumonia

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From a bird’s-eye view, the Dallas-Fort Worth area—“the metroplex”—looks nothing like it did 20 years ago. The hundreds of distribution centers and warehouses that have been built since the turn of the century appear as indistinct white and gray rectangles from above.

But up close, these massive facilities are a bustling hive of activity. Both day and night, hundreds of thousands of workers unload, pick, stow, sort, bin, inject, move and pack the millions and millions of products constantly flowing in and out of the region, where over 125 million square feet of new warehouse space has been built in the last seven years alone.

Carol, who did not want to use her real name for fear of retribution, works at one of Amazon’s eight Dallas-Fort Worth distribution centers. It would be more precise to say she *worked* at Amazon, because although she is still on the employment roll at the company, she says she was injured on the job and became homeless when Amazon fought her workers’ compensation claim, throwing her away like so much garbage. Her story exposes the nightmarish conditions and brutal exploitation that has fueled the growth of online retailers like Amazon.

Carol exudes toughness, but combines an animated “don’t mess with me” attitude with a softness for her children and, especially, for her grandchildren, whom she takes care of and cheers on at their football games. She is a NASCAR fan and jokingly explains that it broke her heart when her favorite driver, Dale Earnhardt, Jr., got married.

She keeps her small apartment neat and organized. Photos of her family line the mantel and she apologizes for the sound of her barking dog. She talks about her father who was killed in a forklift accident on the job many years ago.

She told the *World Socialist Web Site* she only recently moved in after over six months of living in her car on the street. She had to brave the elements through a cold North Texas winter and contracted a dangerous case of pneumonia.

“The dog is the only thing that kept me going,” she says. She doesn’t know how much longer she can afford to stay in her current apartment. “My nightmare is still going on.”

When Carol first started at Amazon, she was awed by the size of her fulfillment center. Its 20-acre frame hides a maze of conveyor belts weaving for miles and miles throughout the building. The fulfillment center—or “FC”—employs enough workers to constitute a small town.

Amazon has received \$287 million in gifts and tax abatements from local governments in Texas alone, according to Good Jobs First, allowing it to construct a network of massive warehouses. Put another way, workers have often paid with their own tax dollars to build the facilities in which they labor.

Carol soon found out that Amazon demands every last drop of sweat

from its workers, who are forced to meet “rate” by moving a certain number of items each hour. Packers, who wrap the items after they have been processed, must pack and tape 189 products per hour, she explains.

Carol reports that many workers cannot keep up and are fired after missing rate three times. In the warehouse, the company rules like a dictatorship. Beyond the constant stress of making rate, workers cannot bring in cell phones and are forced to undergo humiliating security checks when leaving their FCs.

By 2017, Carol had been working at Amazon longer than many. Although she was a certified nursing assistant for nearly two decades before starting at Amazon, she is a savvy worker and figured out ways to save time and make her rates. When new hires come in, she would tell them the tricks of the trade to help them make their rates, too.

One day, Carol says she was lifting up an item that weighed about 50 pounds when she felt a sharp pain travel up and down her spine. She knew immediately that something was terribly wrong. She tried to work through the problem, knowing that she couldn’t afford to miss work. But she couldn’t keep up with the fast pace demanded by the company. A coworker tried to help her get caught up to make rate, but when Carol told him she was in too much pain, he found the PA (assistant manager), who informed her manager.

When she told her manager that the pain was too great to continue, she says the manager gave her “VTO”—voluntary time off without pay—and Carol drove herself to the emergency room. The ER doctor told her it was unsafe to work with her injury and instructed her to rest for five days. The next day, Carol gave Amazon the paperwork from her ER visit and explained to Human Resources (HR) that she could not work.

As Carol recalls, an HR representative responded: “We don’t put people off work for five days just because of a doctor’s orders.” She says Amazon then provided her with a paper called a “certificate of fitness,” which she was expected to have her doctor sign to show that she could return to work. The doctor filled out the certificate of fitness but wrote that Carol was *not* fit to work. He took an x-ray and found that two of the discs in Carol’s spine were herniated.

When he later performed an MRI, Carol says he found a third disc was herniated. An orthopedic surgeon also found a fourth broken disc in her lower back that pinched a nerve. For these doctor visits, Carol forked over a \$1,000 deductible.

When Carol took these results to Amazon to prove her injury, she says the company responded by forcing her to switch to a different “company-approved” doctor. They did so on the pretense that HR had erred by not asking Carol initially whether her injury was work-related, which they apparently claimed invalidated her own doctor’s findings.

The Amazon-approved doctor said she was fit to work and that her injury was just a strain. She says this doctor only glanced at the MRI and that Amazon ignored the note from her original doctor.

Amazon's doctor suggested she take "light duty" for the rest of the year. Soon after, however, Carol explained that Amazon called her off the floor to speak to "Amcare," Amazon's notorious in-house medical and injury program. Carol said an Amcare representative told her that her workers' compensation request had been denied and that she was going back on full, heavy-lifting duty.

Carol told Amcare, "You're screwing my body up more than it is already," but Amazon told her that her only other option was to go on unpaid medical leave. Carol told Amazon they should expect to hear from her lawyer. Carol took Amazon to court for her workers' compensation claim. She says Amazon's lawyer claimed her back problems pre-dated her employment at the FC and tried to blame her for her injury on the witness stand. Earlier, however, Carol says an HR representative told her that they saw the injury take place on security cameras and told her it looked very painful.

Carol won her workers' compensation case when the judge found that her injury was work-related, establishing that Amazon had been wrong in denying her payments. Though months have gone by since this decision, she still has not received any money through the workers' compensation system.

Though roughly a year has passed since she was injured, the pain remains difficult for Carol to bear.

"I have nerve damage in both legs and feet since one of my discs is pinching a nerve in my back. I can't stand for more than 15 to 20 minutes at a time because it hurts my back, it hurts my legs, it hurts my feet. My legs feel like pins and needles are getting stabbed into them. I can't sleep a full night. If I go grocery shopping I can't get more than a few items because I can't walk around the store. I can't eat a home cooked meal anymore because cooking is too difficult. Microwaved stuff is all. I can't eat healthy and I can't afford good food."

She used to take care of her grandchildren, but now they take care of her. Her high school-age grandson has an important football season coming up—he may be recruited to play in college and would he be the first in Carol's family to attend higher education—but she is worried it will be too difficult for her to climb the bleachers and sit still for all four quarters.

"My life has pretty much come to a halt," she says. "I don't have a life."

Carol's back condition was made even less bearable by the fact that she slept in her car all last winter. Before her injury, she was living with one of her adult children, but with her income cut off, she couldn't contribute to the household. All of her children work hard and struggle to provide for their own children, so Carol and her dog moved into her car, moving from park to park each night.

At first, Carol thought she would only be in her car for a week or two until she resolved the confusion with the company. It soon became clear there was no "confusion" on Amazon's part—just the ruthless drive for profit.

She says she received no support for two months as a result of Amazon's efforts to block her workers' compensation. Then meager short-term disability payments from Amazon kicked in at \$501 per month for about six months, which was not enough to cover her cost of living.

When her long-term disability triggered in June, that helped her partly pay back debt she had accumulated and gave her just enough to find an apartment. Now, her long-term disability is coming to an end and she is not sure when her workers' compensation payments will begin. She is no longer covered by Amazon's medical plan and was denied Medicaid because she does not have a child living in the house. She currently does not have healthcare.

"I hate Obamacare," she says, noting that deductibles and premiums are far too high for her to afford and it is unfair to tax people who cannot afford to buy a plan. "I think healthcare should be free for everyone."

Around the time of her injury, Carol had several shares of Amazon stock that she says were due to "vest" and become available to her to sell. When she hired in, Amazon provided two shares of stocks to each new worker that only become available when a worker passes a certain seniority threshold. Carol says she had accumulated six total shares and that each was worth roughly \$1,000 at the time. For Carol, the \$6,000 would have allowed her to put a roof over her head.

But two or three weeks before the shares were scheduled to become available to her, in March 2018, she says Amazon changed the vesting date to the years 2099, 2100 and 2101 [sic].

"Don't tell me they're not vindictive," she says.

That same month, Carol was diagnosed with pneumonia. Winter temperatures in North Texas can drop to the 20s or 10s (Fahrenheit) and Carol was living and sleeping in her car. Her doctor told her she would have been hospitalized if she had waited to go to the doctor. "I could have died from that," she says.

As the weeks turned into months, Carol got into a routine: "I couldn't keep cold food in the car or it would spoil and I couldn't heat anything, so I just ate cold cans of soup and SpaghettiOs. I slept in parks and picnic areas."

She describes what it was like to be homeless after being employed for her entire adult life.

"I had no dignity, I had no pride. I stopped caring. That's how Amazon made me feel. They walked all over me. I couldn't sleep—I was afraid to go to sleep. I was afraid the cops were going to take me to jail for trespassing. It could be a week or two between showers. Can you imagine how that felt?"

"My ex-daughter-in-law and her new husband let me take a shower. I thought, 'This should not be happening.' They fed me before I left. I was losing a lot of weight and was down to about 110 pounds. For someone who has always done things for herself I was broken. I don't think I would have made it if I had to stay homeless for much longer. I would have given up on everything."

She thinks of the parks where she slept and says: "Driving past the picnic areas still brings back memories. It is like PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. I don't want to see those places ever again."

Carol remembers one morning in particular. "Two or three weeks before I got this apartment I was sleeping in a parking lot when my dog woke me up at 2 or 3 in the morning. She was over the top of me growling and barking. At first I tried to get her to be quiet but when I opened my eyes I saw a man standing right there outside my window in the dark. It was a hot night so I had my window down and I got terrified. I turned my car on and sped off. If my dog hadn't have been with me I don't know what would have happened that night."

She thinks about this event for a moment, closes her eyes, and says: "There were plenty of times I thought of giving up my dog, but she was all I had. I have a lot of anxiety now but I didn't have any before. It's hard and it's bad now. I keep telling myself its OK, but Amazon doesn't care. They say, 'We'll just replace that person with another person.' Amazon thinks I'm a piece of trash on the ground and they'll walk all over me. I don't have the money to fight Bezos and he knows it, and that's why he pulls his weight the way he does."

One morning, Carol got a call from her daughter, who reported that a repossession team had come by the daughter's house looking for Carol's car. Without a full income, Carol wasn't able to keep up with her car payments and the lender was trying to find her to take away what had become her home.

She remembers hearing the news. "In my heart it was a panic."

Fearful that a repo team was looking for her, she asked a step-cousin,

who offered her help. “They told me they knew someone who would let me park in his barn way out in the middle of nowhere so the repo people couldn’t find me. I was there for two weeks. There were wild animals, rabid raccoons, skunks. It was scary.”

Finally, when she was able to rent a modest apartment with her long-term disability, her new neighbors were shocked by her story and are furious at Amazon for what they did to Carol.

But Carol is uncertain about the future. Her long-term disability payments are about to end and her workers’ compensation payments are about to begin—a complex process that often leaves many workers without an income for weeks or months. “It’s still iffy,” Carol says. “Am I going to end up homeless again? I don’t know. My nightmare is still going on. If I had those stocks that Amazon has tied up, that would go so far to help me. It’s my stock and I own it and they say I can’t sell it.”

Carol decided to speak out after seeing videos of homeless Amazon worker Shannon Allen, who has given many workers the confidence to speak out about their stories of abuse and exploitation. Now, she wants other workers to have the confidence to tell their stories and expose Amazon for what it really is.



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