

Two workers killed as wall collapses at Baltimore Amazon facility

E.P. Milligan
5 November 2018

Two workers at an Amazon fulfillment center in Baltimore, Maryland died late Friday after a partial building collapse triggered by a severe weather event.

Both workers were trapped under a layer of rubble after a 50-foot wall fell. The first man was found during debris removal Friday night and transferred to a hospital where he later succumbed to his injuries. Firefighters found the second man's body Saturday morning. The two men were identified Saturday as Andrew Lindsey, 54, and Israel Espana Argote, 37.

Amazon officials revealed that neither of the victims were actual employees, but rather third-party contractors. Lindsey, the first man found, had been a material handling technician for real estate consulting firm JLL. The second, Espana Argote, owned one of the many small truck companies contracted by Amazon. Espana, a father of three, had immigrated to the US from Bolivia a decade ago.

According to the National Weather Service, a tornado hit Baltimore and Baltimore County on Friday. The tornado struck the Amazon building shortly after making landfall at 9:42 p.m., pulling off part of the roof as well as the iron rafters. Once the wall came off, the eight-inch concrete panels within destabilized and collapsed. The storm also knocked over a light pole and filled the surrounding roads with debris that smashed car windows. The tornado then lifted briefly before touching down again, striking a nearby apartment complex and pulling off the roof of one of its buildings. No injuries were reported, but several tenants were displaced.

The tornado was an EF-1 with a maximum wind speed of 105 mph. It is the first deadly tornado to strike the greater Baltimore/DC area since 2002. An EF-1, under what is known as the "Enhanced Fujita Scale," is considered "weak" in strength—above only that of an

EF-0. In other words, the disaster was entirely preventable had proper construction methods and safety measures been employed. According to several news reports, workers had taken refuge in their cars outside in the parking lot during the storm while debris flew overhead.

An article posted on USTornadoes.com, a website published by a meteorologist and the information lead for the *Washington Post*'s Capital Weather Gang, titled "Weak tornadoes are deadly, too" states:

"[T]he deadliest weak tornadoes tend to strike those who are not in well constructed[sic] buildings. Examining the period since 1991 ... one finds that ... the lion-share of weak tornado deaths occurred in mobile homes, a vehicle, or outside."

The article concludes: "If underground shelter is not available, the odds of surviving any tornado greatly increase by putting as much sturdy structure between lives and the wind. This is particularly the case with weak tornadoes, as they are generally quite survivable if the right preparations are taken."

Amazon's market capitalization reached over \$1 trillion in value in September, making it the second company to do so in US history after Apple. Amazon's share value has soared by 108 percent in the past year alone.

A massive operation, Amazon is international in nature, employing 566,000 people across five continents. It utilizes state-of-the-art technology and information systems to mobilize and integrate the worldwide distribution of millions of goods. But the immense profits produced on the backs of its workforce are not used to improve conditions for the masses of people treated as nothing more than fodder for the profits of the super-rich.

Amazon whistleblower Shannon Allen, who attracted

worldwide attention when she began posting videos on YouTube documenting her descent into homelessness after being injured at Amazon, spoke with the *International Amazon Workers' Voice* on the tragedy.

As a resident of Texas, Allen is familiar with what to do in case of a tornado. "What you're supposed to do is to get in the stairwell during any inclement weather like that," she explained. "Why these people were out in the warehouse during tornadic activity is beyond me. Somebody dropped the ball on this. Their first concern is not safety. I'm telling you that now. Their only concern is covering their asses because of course they're gonna blame the contractor. They're gonna blame the employee. Everybody's gonna get the blame but Amazon."

She went on to detail the lack of any type of emergency response regimen at Amazon facilities.

"We never had a fire drill, we never had a safety drill, anything!" She said. "We didn't even know if they had alarms to get to a safe area. I don't even know if they're gonna warn employees about something like that. It's so loud at the warehouse, it really does sound like a tornado in there anyway!"

Allen continued describing the effect of such conditions at the web giant, once described as a "great example of what's possible" by then-president Barack Obama in 2013. "OSHA came into their warehouse a month ago and wanted to do hearing tests on people and discovered workers were getting hearing damage. So then it became mandatory that everybody in the warehouse wear earplugs. So even if there was an alarm going on, how would they hear it? They need some type of light also to warn employees!"

"I could believe that [this happened]," she said. "My friend who works in Moreno Valley in California was an employee when those fires had gotten out of control and were getting closer and closer. They never let the employees off work, even when the whole facility was filled with smoke. They wouldn't even let employees go home to save their homes, let alone save themselves! They still had to come to work every day in that smoke filled warehouse."

It is likewise significant that the tragedy occurred in Maryland. Considered to be in the top of the running as a location for the corporation's second headquarters "HQ2" project, the state offered Amazon an \$8.5 billion tax break earlier this year in an effort to entice

the company to choose Montgomery County, in the Washington, DC suburbs, as the site for its new facility.

The tax break package, which is the largest offer in the country so far, will serve to further siphon off funds from the very infrastructure programs needed to prevent the loss of life and damage that occurred Friday night.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact