

Amazon worker dies of heart attack at facility in Murfreesboro, Tennessee

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14 November 2018

On September 30, an Amazon worker died of cardiac arrest at a fulfillment center in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The story was not reported until October 30, after whistleblowers contacted WSMV News-4 Nashville. The station published one article on the incident and then dropped the story.

The man, Mike Gellasch, 61, allegedly died because no one could find a working communication device to call for help in time. Because it is against company policy for workers to carry cellphones within the facility, they first had to radio security and instruct them to call 911. An audio recording obtained by a WSMV investigative team revealed that a security guard had put a 911 operator on hold and then never came back to the line. A different individual eventually called back. According to the ambulance report, it took around 5 minutes for anyone to call 911 after Gellasch collapsed.

Amazon was quick to respond to the coverage, claiming in a statement that “the reporting by WSMV is incorrect” and that EMS had been called “within two minutes.” The *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV) spoke at length with a former worker at the Murfreesboro facility who wished to remain anonymous to prevent any retaliation from the company in case he needed to reapply for a job.

The worker claimed he had not learned of the incident until he saw the local news story in a post on social media. “I was actually scheduled that day,” he began. “I had no knowledge of the incident until probably within the last ten days. That’s a good five or six weeks before I knew the incident ever even occurred. I spoke to some of my coworkers and they had the same story, that they didn’t know about it either. I don’t remember seeing on the six o’ clock, or the ten o’ clock. It wasn’t publicized very much.”

He questioned the lack of proper emergency response systems. “Why aren’t defibrillators posted [in the building]? Why don’t they have an EMT station? Why don’t they have an emergency response station where you can get a straight call out to 911? We’re not allowed to have cellphones! Why don’t they even have a first aid station on every level? Would a defibrillator have saved this man’s life? It wouldn’t have killed him.

“I’ve often wondered: If I fell over dead, how long would it take for someone to find me?”

The worker continued, “I think Amazon should have their own healthcare plan. Amazon should have a nurse practitioner at every location. Medications should be available at the clinic on site.”

He told the IAWV that Gellasch had been employed through the company’s Camper Force program, which allows retired workers to travel the country and work at various Amazon facilities in return for an hourly wage and pre-paid recreational vehicle lot fees.

He claimed he had seen some workers in the facility who appeared to be 80 years old. “There are some older people that work full time and part time in the facility and I unfortunately feel like a lot of people are forced to work at a later age,” he said. “Whether it’s unfortunate events in their life, or something else, I don’t know. But everybody has a story.”

He described the Murfreesboro facility as enormous and sprawling, estimating that at times an individual worker’s route might range from “[aisle] 100 to 245,” which is “probably 1,500 feet—just shy of a quarter mile. When you get spread out like that, you really have to hustle to keep your rate high,” the worker said.

“Depending on the volume and demand, it wasn’t uncommon to be alone,” he continued. “Say if you’re on the third floor in the 200’s [aisles]. It’s not

uncommon to be far away from civilization. It's pretty isolated. I've definitely gone an hour or an hour-and-a-half without seeing anybody else."

The worker described other unsafe working conditions. "A lot of the places will stick overweighted or heavy items above your head, and they're not supposed to," he said. "There have been a lot of times I've opened up a bin above my head and they had put way too much weight in them. I mean we're talking 25 maybe 30 pounds of weight. You're not prepared for that because they shouldn't be that heavy."

He described the unrealistic requirements placed on workers. "I quit over a section called M-Mod," he said. "In, M-Mod, it's an impossibility to make rate [100 per hour]. You can't make rate down there. They know it and they haven't solved the problem. They say they can't solve the problem because the computer system won't let them adjust that section to a lower rate, which I find ridiculous. Amazon is a trillion-dollar company. I can't imagine they don't have a software engineer in that building who can differentiate different sections at a different rate. The answer is they won't do it," the worker told the *International Amazon Workers Voice*.

"Everybody dreads going into M-Mod because they know your rate is going to drop by at least 50 an hour if not more," he continued. "The last time I went into M-Mod, my gun was reading at 170 an hour. I worked a quarter there, which is typically two-and-a-half hours. At the end of the day, my rate was exactly 100. And that's because when I came out of M-Mod, I had to bust my butt to make up the difference [back to 100]."

"They actually fired a friend of mine over that. The rate on her scanner was 99.96 when she got fired [0.04 percent below quota]. It was posted up there on the board. They gave her an ultimatum to either quit or be fired, and she quit. She was a really good worker, but she kept getting stuck in M-Mod."

The worker also commented on the issue of inadequate pay. Around a week prior to Jeff Bezos' announcement that the starting wage at Amazon would increase to \$15 an hour, the worker said, management announced a 25-cent wage increase at his facility.

"The day we had our meeting [that announced the quarter raise], people walked out," he said. "I know a few people who laid their badge on the table and said, 'Screw you. I'm done.' They hadn't given

Murfreesboro a raise since its inception, almost five or six years ago. They gave us a 25-cent raise and the month before, Amazon had made a trillion dollars. So, I think people had the right to be mad."

Alluding to the mass discontent bubbling underneath the surface of the working class as a whole, he noted, "There was just a lot of animosity. A lot of people are mad. And then they were messing with peoples' rates. And even though this was a Murfreesboro incident, I think this was something going on across the nation."

He also understood the fraud of the 15 dollar an hour wage, the total wage increase cost which represented just 0.001 percent of Amazon's market capitalization. "I just think they got on the boat and got some free publicity," he said. "The truth is, what they did was just screw long-term employees. People that had been there two years or longer, they've lost about five or six thousand dollars a year because they took away their stock holdings and their quarterly bonus. The way it is now, you walk in the door making \$15 an hour as a new hire. If you've been there two years, you make \$15.20 an hour. If you've been there three or more years, you make \$15.90 an hour. So that was just another big slap in the face.

"All they did was shift money around. It didn't cost them a dime. And they're actually probably going to make money! They don't even have an answer to what they're going to do with profit sharing. The last I heard was they were going to implement some kind of employee stock option. But when a guy's making 15 bucks an hour, and your company's stock is trading at 2,000 bucks a share, you're wasting your time!"

"The bottom line is we're all working to better ourselves," he concluded. "And Jeff Bezos wants to talk all his hot air about his commission programs, or college programs. I think he tries to come off as a socialist, but he's way more of a capitalist! Don't you think Amazon ought to be paying us 25, 30 or more dollars an hour? Well, I think [Bezos] needs to share. Without a doubt."



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