

“I think the whole shipping business is a little corrupt”

Amazon worker wrongfully fired for theft reveals company’s dead-end appeal system

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A former employee at Amazon’s BWI-5 facility in Baltimore, Maryland contacted the *International Amazon Workers Voice* to describe what can only be called a nightmare of corporate red tape.

Hired in 2016, the 25-year old worker—“D”—was a permanent warehouse employee, meaning he had surpassed the standards of the internet giant and had survived the corporation’s onerous and indefinite probationary period without an infraction, allowing them to receive minor benefits granted to “permanent” workers.

Unfortunately, job protection and the right to a fair hearing were not among the benefits that were listed. In August 2017, D was terminated from his position as a warehouse associate for allegedly stealing an item of food from the in-house food vending system—a Twix ice cream bar. “I had been in a conversation with friends before my shift started and forgot to pay for it at the ‘Canteen’ [vending company] kiosk,” he said.

“As I began my shift, I was approached by one of the managers and was told that I had been called to the Human Resources office.” Waiting in HR, D struggled hard to figure out why the manager had requested his presence. “I finally realized that I had forgotten to pay [for the ice cream].” The worker noted that he had a tendency to be forgetful but had never stolen anything in his life or had any previous infractions at the company.

D was about to enter a bureaucratic system from which he would not emerge unscathed. “I met a person from loss prevention as well as a HR representative named ‘Brandy.’ I was taken back to the office and the guy from loss prevention talked with me, trying to get a sense of my personality. He chatted with me about video games and things like that,” D said.

The gentleman from loss prevention then explained the real purpose for the meeting. “He asked me if I had anything I wanted to say to him,” D told the IAWV, after which the young worker willingly confessed to forgetting to pay for the

ice cream treat. “It shook me,” D stated, “I had never been in a situation like that before” and only wished to come clean.

D was forced to sign a statement explaining the reasons for the failure to pay at the automated kiosk before being informed that he was being suspended and could expect a phone call Sunday which would determine the company’s final judgement. “I was then escorted out,” the worker said.

“This is when things start to get bad on Amazon’s part,” D explained.

Sunday came, but Amazon did not call.

“I’m thinking, ‘no problem, they’re probably just busy.’ So on Monday, I went back to Amazon and spoke to security.” D was informed that the company was still in the process of investigating his “theft” and would promptly call back the next day.

Tuesday came, but nobody called.

Giving the company the whole day to follow through on its promises before returning to inquire about his job status Wednesday, this time D was confronted by a hostile company representative. “On Wednesday, I was not greeted nicely,” he said. An unknown representative from HR approached D, aggressively telling him off. “She said to me: ‘You know what you did. I don’t know why you’re back.’” At that point, loss prevention representatives approached the startled worker, informing him that he had been officially terminated.

Despite this inconsiderate treatment, the young worker was determined to appeal the company’s decision and keep his job. “I really like Amazon, I didn’t want to have to do this,” he said, referring to his decision to speak out about his experiences.

D continued, explaining the runaround the company was giving him:

“I called Amazon’s Employee Resource Center [ERC], which is basically a hotline for associates to appeal decisions made by management.” There, the confused worker was

informed that he was amazingly still employed at the company: “The system said that I was on UPT [Unpaid Time Off], even though they said they had terminated me.” D was told he would need to be “legitimately terminated” before appealing his firing.

D was forced into the undignified predicament of having to beg the company to fire him, so he could then file an appeal. This situation went on for two weeks.

Finally, an HR rep, “Charles,” called D to inform him that he had been fired, again. Seizing the opportunity to file an appeal, D was informed that the charge of theft could not be appealed. “I was told that my profile had been flagged and I could never work for Amazon ever again.”

At this point, D’s determination began to falter. “There was no legitimacy to any of it, I wasn’t shown any footage of the ‘theft’ taking place so I could verify it was me. For all I know they had seen some other guy stealing. I took his [the HR manager’s] word for it. I shouldn’t have. I shouldn’t have given up. I feel like I was lied to,” D declared.

“It feels good just to have someone to talk about this with... it’s been my struggle for the past year. I was a permanent worker. You’ve got to have a clean record to become a permanent worker, I think they could have worked with me,” he said.

“I’m just an average 25-year-old guy, I live with my family. As bad as it sounds, I don’t feel like I’m the same as those other workers [who relay their experiences of abuse to the IAWV]. I actually liked working for the company, I wanted to stay there and move up, even become a manager myself,” he said. “I like the people, the problem is the people in charge,” he said. “Amazon treats people like they’re expendable. At some point, everyone in the city will know how bad they are, their reputation as an employer will suffer.”

D’s facility, located in east Baltimore, was opened in 2015 on the former site of a General Motors auto plant, which had previously employed thousands of workers at significantly higher wages until its final shuttering in 2005. Amazon, whose average “associate” makes little more than the minimum wage, has sought to expand its presence into deindustrialized regions such as Baltimore. Last year the corporation announced that it would open another distribution center at the former location of the now-shuttered Bethlehem Steel, once the largest steel mill on the US east coast.

Last month, several contractors working at the east Baltimore facility were killed under unclear circumstances when a minor tornado touched down in the vicinity of the distribution hub.

Commenting on the weather-related tragedy, D stated that

he and fellow workers had doubts about the structural integrity of the Amazon building the workers were housed in, suggesting that there was likely cost cutting involved in their deaths.

Currently, D is employed at United Parcel Service (UPS). Asked about the conditions there, he said: “The building I’m in has no break system [in place]. It’s illegal. They don’t like us to work 8 hours, but there is no set system. For us, we have “break” if a [delivery] truck is late. I think the whole shipping business is a little corrupt. They think people are robots. They really don’t care.”

Asked about his opinion of the Teamsters trade union, D explained “I never liked them; I think the management pays them, they know all about [the company’s break system], they don’t care. You could tell them about it and, even if they sent someone to investigate, they’d just end up becoming part of the problem, too.”

D’s experience, first at Amazon and then at UPS, is indicative of an entire generation of young working-class people who are becoming radicalized by growing levels of inequality and exploitation and corporations that treat their employees with disdain and contempt. From autoworkers, to UPS and Amazon workers, to the millions employed in low-paying service work, the conclusions he and many, many others are beginning to draw about the capitalist system terrify the ruling class more than anything.

“Eventually, when packages start showing up late [due to work stoppages], people will notice,” the young worker added.

“I work for UPS now, but I still handle packages for Amazon, as well as the US Postal Service,” he continued, suggesting the irrationality of forcing UPS and Amazon workers, as well as other workers in the industry, to struggle against one another for jobs.

“Some drivers [at UPS] had their hours cut yesterday, because Amazon is now delivering packages with its ‘Air’ system. Overnight delivery, in the middle of Christmas season!”

“The workers are the ones that make this company its money,” he concluded.



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