

Amazon worker describes brutal conditions at Tracy, California warehouse during Camp Fire

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The *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV) was recently contacted by an Amazon worker in Tracy, California to bring to light the atrocious working conditions faced by workers at the facility, located in the impoverished Central Valley region of the state.

“John,” who chose to use a pseudonym fearing he would face retribution from Amazon if he used his real name, was inspired to speak out by the courageous stand taken by Amazon workers and whistleblowers Shannon Allen and Michelle Quinones. He works full-time as a “picker” and has been at the Tracy facility for roughly a year.

Last month, after the Camp Fire tragically destroyed the towns of Paradise and Magalia and killed at least 86 people, the fire continued to rage for roughly two weeks. A thick cloud of smoke enveloped the surrounding region, spanning hundreds of miles south and west, and temporarily giving Northern California the worst air quality in the world.

John informed the IAWV that during this time—in the lead-up to the notorious holiday “peak” season—Amazon ordered its workers to continue laboring in the hazardous air as if conditions were normal. At one of their daily morning meetings, management claimed that they “had installed charcoal filters” that would supposedly protect workers from the smoke. John and his coworkers doubted this claim, but felt that even if such filters were installed, “it was still really smoky in there and people were often coughing.”

“It was very smoky. The air is normally bad in the warehouse because they have terrible air conditioning, but during the fire it was almost unbearable. Some people were wearing face masks. I feel like it should have been mandatory for everyone to wear them and Amazon should’ve provided them if they were going to make us work, but it wasn’t like that. People were getting sick from it; the toxic air wasn’t circulating out of the building.”

John noted, “We told management that the air quality in here isn’t good and it’s not healthy. People complain all the time. There’s a bulletin board where people complain about the air and water quality at the warehouse, and to my knowledge nothing was ever done.”

John wears glasses and was unable to wear a face mask because it impacted his vision. Without a mask, “I would get headaches and a little congested. It would get worse as the day went on

because of the exposure. It was like that basically for the whole time of the fire, until the smoke started to clear out of the air when the fire ended in late November. As long as the smoke was heavy and thick, which was about two weeks, the air was terrible. For those two weeks it was like that every day. My headache would slowly build up over the course of the day, and my nose would always be running. It got a little bit better when I got home, but it was just horrible because the smoke was everywhere.”

John suspects that older and more vulnerable workers likely faced serious health problems, but commented, “We only hear about people getting sick or passing out if it’s really serious and management tells us. If someone gets injured, we usually don’t hear about it. I imagine a lot of people were going to Amcare for problems with breathing.”

On the day when the air quality in Tracy reached its worst level, Amazon finally closed the facility for one day. “They called and left an automated voice message,” John said. “I thought to myself, ‘thank God.’ Everyone was saying that they should’ve closed earlier, and that we shouldn’t have had to work like that at all.”

“Amazon should’ve provided breathing masks for everyone, including types for people with glasses. They should’ve used commercial vacuums to suck out the bad smoky air and brought in filtered air, for those entire two weeks. It was really horrible what they did to us.”

The total disregard for workplace safety and the health of its employees is one of the central characteristics of Amazon, which has come to dominate the global e-commerce market through the hyper-exploitation of its immense international workforce. An untold number of current and former Amazon employees have endured broken bones, torn muscles, damaged joints, and even become permanently disabled and homeless, while the company ruthlessly works to minimize its payments through workers compensation and its bare-bones medical care system.

The brutal conditions that Tracy workers faced during the Camp Fire were merely a deepening of the facility’s regular sweatshop-like atmosphere. John described the lack of basic amenities like clean water, air conditioning and regular bathroom breaks.

John highlighted the lack of clean water, as the Central Valley region is notorious for having poor water quality due to pesticide runoff from the region’s vast agricultural production. John stated that “people get sick from drinking the water, which tastes terrible.

Some of the water filters say they haven't been changed since January. Some of them don't have any label. The fountains in the break room are really calcified, you can see the water stains."

In addition, "We don't have real air conditioning in there, and some of the stations don't even have fans. I've seen people pass out from the heat and dehydration. If you don't have money then you have to drink water from the fountains, because if you bought water every hour you would spend \$10 each day. There's only two fountains where people go to get water, because it's less tainted and won't make you sick."

John continued, "On a normal day, the air quality is pretty bad in there. The air is just filtered through a large fan and a tube of tarp. There's nothing that circulates the air out, you're just breathing the same recycled air all day."

"There's a stairwell that all workers have to use to go to the bathroom or to get water. Inside the stairwell, it can be over 105 degrees Fahrenheit. It feels like you're in a furnace, because there's no air conditioning, and sometimes it's hotter than it is outside. If you're a tote runner or water spider, you have to use that stairwell all day. Water spiders take the tote from the station and put it on the conveyor. Some of them have to climb two to three floors at times, going up and down the stairs, sometimes really fast when it's busy."

John also shared that he knows multiple pregnant women who are forced to work at the rate of their peers, even during the speed-up and longer hours of the holiday "peak" season. He stated, "I heard a story of a pregnant worker having to pick during peak, she was still picking up heavy items as a normal picker would. She was sometimes on the fourth floor where it's the hottest, and I heard that she was vomiting up there."

John stated, "When I first started working at Tracy, I saw at least three pregnant women picking heavy items. I've heard from multiple pregnant women that have had these same problems of being overworked, picking up heavy packages, working 10-12-hour shifts, and even longer during peak season. I've met women past six months pregnant picking sports drinks and items up to 40 pounds heavy. Most of the time, the heavier items are on the bottom of the crates, so they have to bend over very far to pick them up."

John commented, "Seeing pregnant women in the factory picking items like anyone else is just crazy. Pregnant women aren't supposed to be picking up heavy items. What if something goes wrong with her baby because she's been overworked?"

The conditions faced by all workers at the facility are intense, and management has tightened the screws in recent months during the lead-up to peak season. John noted, "The standard rate at our facility is 310 items per hour, but a couple months ago management started to take roughly 40 items off from everyone's count, that they didn't fully explain." When items are taken "off" a worker's count, that means they don't count toward the total, resulting in a speed-up.

"You can get a write-up for not meeting rate, and you have basically two before you're fired because you're fired on your third write-up. If you want to be safe in your job, you now have to pick 350 items because they take some off arbitrarily. One time I was picking nearly 500 items, but my rate was listed as 360."

These hostile workplace conditions have created a revolving door at the Tracy facility, as well as most other Amazon warehouses, where workers rarely stay for an extended period of time. John stated, "At least once per week someone is getting fired. A lot of people are leaving and have quit because of the new rules that are being implemented. The turnaround is crazy. This is the only job I've been at where you can have ten people get fired or quit in one week. It's a toxic mix of everything—miscommunication, non-communication, all these arbitrary and unjust rules. And people are just getting tired of it. Everything is supposed to be professional and it's not."

"When I started working there, we had a group of at least 30 people that I got hired with, and I'd say there's only four or five of us now. A majority of people left because of the working conditions, and everyone else was fired because they couldn't hit the rate. It was like every day we were getting less and less."

Asked how he thought conditions could be improved at Amazon, John stated, "I feel like the workers should have more of a say-so on the conditions. We are the ones that are doing the work. People shouldn't get reprimanded by management for making complaints or suggestions that things be changed. We should have quarterly meetings about working conditions and how we can change them, and actually start implementing our demands. We're one of the main companies in the world, but we don't even get clean water. We should be provided with clean fruit and healthy snacks. For the back-breaking work that we do, we should be provided with protein bars and supplements during the day as needed."

John was prompted to speak out about these conditions after reading Shannon Allen's story and other reports from the IAWV. He stated, "It's always hard to be the first to step out and stand up against somebody else. You'll always take the beating a lot harder. But the people that are stepping out are like modern-day heroes."

Regarding the recent meeting of autoworkers held in Detroit, where it was resolved to build independent rank-and-file committees to organize a fight against GM's threatened plant closures and mass layoff of over 15,000 workers, John gave a message of solidarity. He stated: "Keep moving forward, keep your head to the plow and keep planting those seeds, because everything starts out small, but it'll keep growing. I feel like everybody needs to be on one accord, and even though it's hard in the beginning we have to move forward. If you want real change, you have to fight for it, and it's not easy. If you keep pushing forward it will be done, and the change will happen. It may take months or years or decades, but eventually people will come forward and unite to create broader change."



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