

“Amazon puts us at risk:” Warehouse workers discuss company’s inaction in the face of the coronavirus pandemic

Tom Carter
19 March 2020

Amazon whistleblower Meghan King has been working off and on at the GSP-1 warehouse in Spartanburg, South Carolina, where she has been injured twice, since 2012. She spoke this week with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the effect of the pandemic on her life and her co-workers’ lives.

Warehouse workers have already tested positive in Spain, Italy, and in the US state of Washington. A recent online petition calling for measures to prevent the spread of the virus has been signed by 1,500 Amazon workers.

With millions of people quarantined or otherwise confined to their homes, orders through Amazon have mounted precipitously. In the UK, where Amazon employs approximately 27,000 workers, warehouse workers report being subjected to compulsory overtime to meet increased demand.

On Friday, schools in Meghan’s area closed, and many Amazon workers are now staying home to care for their children. In Meghan’s case, she cares for three children. Management has indicated that workers will not be penalized for not showing up in March, but at the same time, workers are not receiving paid time off.

How will she survive without pay? “That’s a good question,” Meghan says. “I live paycheck to paycheck now. Many working class families, they have a buffer. I quite literally live paycheck to paycheck. Three weeks with no income and I’m screwed.”

As of this writing, fewer than 100 workers were showing up to each shift at her warehouse, which is less than 25 percent of the usual numbers. “There is a breakdown of communication,” she says, between management and the employees. “There is a breakdown of pretty much everything. Management is twiddling their thumbs trying to figure out what they are doing, and they don’t even know. Meanwhile, many people who do want to go to work are being shafted because they don’t have childcare. In my case, I don’t have childcare.”

Meghan was critical of the government’s handling of the

crisis. “The government decided to say this is really not that important,” she said. “It’s a terrible thing.” Without pay, workers are faced with losing their savings, car, and home. The financial strain and stress tears families apart.

Amazon, too, had put workers’ lives at risk. “Amazon knew that there were Seattle workers who had contracted the virus, and they kept that from us,” she said. “Amazon put us at risk.”

Workers are concerned that the virus could spread through the packages shipped between warehouses and handled by workers in the same warehouse. “If they cough or sneeze, or if they wiped their nose, and then I’m opening that box, then I’m exposed. There are any number of ways it could happen. We’re basically all now exposed to whatever that person had. And we work in a warehouse, and our warehouse ships everywhere.”

A study published March 11 in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that the virus can survive for about 24 hours on cardboard, and up to two to three days on certain other materials. Workers are anxious for information about what precautions need to be taken to prevent the transmission of the disease in the workplace.

Like many Amazon workers, Meghan said that she did not mind risking own her health to ship essential goods to people that needed them. “I don’t mind if it’s vitamins, gloves, masks, soap or hand sanitizer,” she said. “We do ship a lot of vitamins. But the second I have to pack something non-essential, that needs to stop. We have been shipping a lot of non-essential items.”

Beginning Tuesday, Amazon announced that it would limit non-essential items coming into the warehouses.

Meghan also spoke about the recent announcement of the emergency hiring of 100,000 new Amazon temporary employees during the crisis. “Now you are exposing us again,” she said. “Are you testing all these people for COVID-19? I don’t think so.”

This measure, which was accompanied by a raise from \$15

to \$17 per hour, is meant to temporarily replace the workers with children or with health risks who are not able to work during the crisis with workers who are more healthy—or simply more desperate. “Also, they do not get the same benefits,” Meghan added. “Those people are getting shafted. I don’t think that’s fair either.”

“Risk our lives for an extra \$2?” asked an Amazon DTW1 worker in Detroit. “Need that extra money but Amazon is putting SO many people at risk,” wrote another worker. “This should not be legal to do especially with the amount of people we work with!”

Amazon whistleblower Shannon Allen, who won international support in 2018 for her exposure of conditions at the DFW-7 warehouse near Dallas, Texas, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the need for the working class to respond collectively to the pandemic.

With masses of workers without pay during the crisis, many will be in danger of becoming homeless. Shannon expressed particular sympathy for these workers, since she became homeless herself after an injury left her unable to work and the workers’ compensation system blocked the necessary treatment.

“I think about everyone that is in my situation, or in an even worse situation, who is homeless and living on the street. When is anyone going to care for them? Every single person—that is someone’s daughter, brother, father, sister.”

“They need to open up some of these empty hotels,” she said, referencing one of the demands made by the Socialist Equality Party’s National Committee in a statement published on Monday. “We need to open up these empty buildings so that we can use them for all of the people who will be homeless and to provide treatment for people who get sick.”

She also suggested, with a wry sense of humor, that Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos be permitted to keep one of his many mansions, and for the remainder of the mansions to be converted for use as emergency shelters.

Last month, even as the epidemic unfolded, Bezos purchased a new 13,000-square-foot Beverly Hills mansion for \$165 million. According to *Architectural Digest*, the mansion features two guest houses, a tennis court, a swimming pool and a nine-hole golf course. For many Amazon workers confronting desperation and financial ruin during the pandemic, this amounts to spitting in their faces.

“He has all these employees who are sitting at home without pay. They may be on a leave of absence but they are not getting paid. Jeff Bezos knows about the virus when he buys the new mansion last month. He could have put that \$165 million to preparations for the pandemic. Instead, he goes and buys another mansion. He already has plenty of mansions.”

Discussing the response of the capitalist class to the pandemic, Shannon said, “They are looking out for themselves. It’s us against them. I can guarantee that if one of these one-percenters gets sick, they will get the treatment they need. They are not going to lose their home. Their families are not going to starve. Meanwhile, the poor worker bees are going to work coughing, trying to keep their families afloat.”

“Everybody is feeling this and everyone is scared,” Shannon said. “But all of us workers are in this together. From the person behind the register at the truck stop to the truckers who bring the goods to the warehouses to the Amazon workers who get the packages to where they are needed. We all need to look out for one another.”

She urged workers to take the pandemic seriously and to disregard all the official efforts to downplay the scale of the crisis. “There are going to be dead bodies piling up everywhere if we don’t act.”

For workers who are still in the Amazon facilities, few precautions have been taken beyond making hand sanitizer available and posting signs instructing workers to wash their hands.

“Amazon doesn’t know how to react to this crap,” one worker wrote on social media. “Doing one thing and then another like putting tape on the floor to tell us how far to be from each other.” Various haphazard safety instructions have been crisscrossing at the warehouses. Workers were told not to take their lunch boxes on the floor, for example. This resulted in lunchboxes being crowded into the refrigerator. New instructions were issued to avoid touching each other’s lunchboxes.

“This morning, I told several people about the *World Socialist Web Site*,” Shannon said. “I was telling a trucker about it and they are all working unsafe amounts of overtime.”

“I get excited when I see other workers getting serious about politics,” she said. “I like to see workers stepping forward and speaking out, and there are more every day. It’s not just Amazon, it’s all workers. The issue is how can we collectively change the system. I don’t think people realize the working class has a lot of power. We hold all of the power.”



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