

As COVID-19 spreads in Minnesota, Wisconsin warehouses

Amazon worker's job in limbo after seeking to take time off for injury

Nick Barrickman
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Despite the multi-million-dollar advertising campaign by Amazon boasting how safe conditions are for workers, the COVID-19 pandemic is spreading throughout the company's warehouses and on-the-job injuries continue as workloads increase due to more online shopping.

At least 88 Amazon workers have tested positive for the COVID-19 infection at the company's Shakopee, Minnesota warehouse, 18 miles southwest of Minneapolis. In Kenosha, Wisconsin, just south of Milwaukee, at least 60 workers have become infected.

While Amazon will not publicly release information on the number of infections and deaths, former Amazon employee Jana Jumpp has compiled a list showing that at least 1,600 workers have been infected by the deadly disease and at least 10 have died.

The *International Amazon Workers Voice* was recently contacted by an injured worker who has been given the run-around by the trillion-dollar corporation after being hurt on the job.

The worker, who used the pseudonym "Alex," had been injured a week earlier in a fall inside one of AmazonFresh's food freezers. "I normally have to handle 8-10 bags of food at a time for customers," Alex stated. Particular orders can contain all sorts of food combinations, including multiple Coca-Cola cans and large items. "I spent 50 minutes inside these freezers," he said, and "the manager keeps telling us to go faster."

This particular day, the floor was wet and frozen. "I fell and landed on my wrist," said Alex. This was not the first time, he said, that a worker had fallen in the freezer where Amazon is known to confine workers for hours at a time to pick items to ship.

Having injured his wrist, Alex sought to see a medic.

"I told the manager, but he didn't care." Instead, Alex was instructed to go to the restroom and then back to work. With a swollen hand and in pain, however, he could not work. After finding a sympathetic manager, he was given a form to fill out.

Having finally been given permission to see the company's in-house medic, Alex was then placed in contact with a doctor of the company's choosing. "I was told not to go to the hospital," he said. Alex suspects that Amazon did this to avoid having to pay workers compensation. It was determined that he had fallen and broken his wrist.

The company's doctor prescribed Alex be put on a job involving light duty work, taking co-workers' temperatures at the front entrance as part of Amazon's response to the coronavirus. Fearing that his wrist would not heal properly, Alex sought to take time off to rest.

That is when things became complicated. When he tried to report for work on Sunday last week, his identification card would not work.

"They are playing games with me," he said on the phone to the IAWV, clearly in an agitated state. Alex was told to call human resources, but the number would not connect. "I called 10 times, I could not get through."

When Alex went back to work, his card was still deactivated. "They are giving me the run around, playing games," he said. "They want me to come to the warehouse" to get reactivated, "but I can't even get in the door without the punch card."

This is not the first time that the company's automated human resource phone service has created bottlenecks and complications for workers simply

seeking to straighten out minor administrative issues. According to Bloomberg News, “the design of Amazon’s HR department reflects the strengths and weaknesses of the company’s culture. It’s heavily automated, which helps Amazon grow quickly and restrain costs but these days leaves employees hitting dead ends with chatbots, smartphone apps and phone trees.”

Bloomberg spoke to a number of Amazon employees who were “owed back pay for time spent on sick leave or in quarantine, have been scheduled for shifts while sick, or were denied leave despite providing documentation of conditions Amazon says should make them eligible to stay home without pay.”

The IAWV has reported on other occasions that workers were denied sick pay while being forced to quarantine after having likely contracted the deadly virus. In this case, Alex had a doctor’s confirmation of his injury and was still being denied the right to take time off.

Amazon has made a literal killing off of the exploitation of its workers as millions have sheltered in place throughout the pandemic. The corporation has raked in billions in profits while going on a mass hiring spree, beefing up its workforce to nearly 850,000 employees. These workers were hired and sent to work without even having proper personal protective equipment, in many cases.

Predictably, Amazon warehouses have become a vector for the transmission of COVID-19, with large outbreaks in Minnesota, Wisconsin, New York and other locations.

In a 60 Minutes interview last month, Dave Clark, Amazon’s head of US operations, claimed the company’s infection rate was “just under what the actual community infection rate is.” Clark asserted that whatever infections were being transmitted at Amazon’s warehouses were being brought into the facilities by the workers themselves, who were not practicing social distancing outside the job. When asked by an interviewer for the actual number of cases reported, Clark stated this information “isn’t particularly useful.”

“I’ve worked there for more than a year, and now that I’m hurt and can’t make them any money, they just want to get rid of me, like I’m garbage or something,” Alex said. “They don’t care about

people,” he said. “They always say that safety is their number one concern, but then, once you work for them, all you hear is ‘faster!’”

Alex spoke about Amazon’s insufficient social distancing precautions in regard to COVID-19. “It’s impossible not to touch other people” and break social distancing at Amazon, he said, concluding by denouncing the company. “Amazon is a scam!”

Last month, it was reported that the company had planted false news reports in over a dozen local media programs around the United States touting the company’s fictional safety measures it had implemented during the pandemic.



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