

“They just see us as numbers.”

Ohio Amazon worker speaks out against unsafe workplace conditions in pandemic

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An Amazon worker in Ohio recently spoke with *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV), published by the *World Socialist Web Site*, to describe the unsafe working conditions at her facility and the difficulties she faced after taking a leave of absence earlier this year.

While Amazon’s CEO, Jeff Bezos, has been able to increase his wealth by \$70 billion amidst the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, Amazon workers have had to risk infection and death for poverty wages, often suffering from debilitating medical issues due to repetitive tasks and long hours in poorly-ventilated warehouses.

The Amazon worker, whose name has been changed to Sara to protect her from management retaliation, has worked at Amazon for three years. Sara suffers from asthma and took what she expected to be a brief leave of absence prior to the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. She recently spoke with the IAWV to describe the bureaucratic nightmare she faced while off work and the unsafe conditions she faced on return to her facility.

“I think I had COVID-19 when I took my leave of absence,” she said. However, testing was not widely available in that time frame, so she was never able to confirm whether she had it or not. “It is hard to tell though, since I have asthma. I had not had to use my inhaler for maybe five years prior to working at Amazon. However, since I started working at Amazon, I have had to use my inhaler, and I usually only really have outbreaks in the warehouse since there is a lot of dust and debris in the air.”

“Before my leave of absence, I looked extremely pale and I sounded like I had been a smoker for the past 40

years. I was walking into the building and quickly having coughing fits and nose bleeds, which is very unusual for me. Eventually someone from Amcare [Amazon’s health care] told me that I should see a doctor.”

“Since then,” she continued, “Amazon has given me hell about long-term and short-term disability. When I contacted them about returning to work, they set a date and then two days before I was supposed to return to work, they demanded that my doctor send a note saying that I could return to work. They kept delaying me coming back to work, and demanding doctor’s notes. Eventually my doctor started to get angry since he had to keep writing me the same note.”

“I spoke with several people in Amazon about my leave, but no one would change my case manager. I was being called by my ‘accommodations manager’ every few days and being asked the same question by the same person. I was literally just telling the same woman that for medical reasons I need a few minutes to clean up my workstation. Eventually she got mad at me and stopped calling.”

“When I eventually did return to work,” she said, “I did my normal shift and worked during Thanksgiving. However, the managers must have changed something after I worked since I never got holiday pay.”

Due to lack of adequate income while on her extended leave, Sara began having difficulty paying her bills. She was only able to stay in her home by allowing family members to move in with her.

Describing conditions at the warehouse during the pandemic, she said, “There are a number of OSHA violations, and there is a general disregard for safety.”

“I do a lot of labor sharing,” she said, referring to

work in different departments “and I do get some time to clean up my workspace and wipe down everything. And we are supposed to wipe down everything before we leave. But a lot of times I go to a workstation and there are used pop bottles. These are bottles that have clearly touched someone’s mouth and they would have had to take their mask off to drink.”

“I know the CDC guidelines,” she continued, “and that the virus can stay on boxes or other material for four hours. Every day I get a popup that someone else at my workplace has tested positive for COVID-19, and today I got multiple alerts.”

“Amazon says that they will contact us if we worked with someone who had COVID-19. But the alerts only tell us that someone was tested and the last day they worked. We aren’t told who had it or what department they were working in. I am fine not being told who had it, but we should at least be given the department so we know if we were exposed. A lot of times you will only find out who had it or their department if the person posts in one of the Amazon Facebook groups.

“I am in a bunch of these Facebook groups, and I have heard some real terrible things. One woman said she had COVID-19, and two months later HR just called her in and fired her. They claimed she had forged the note and that she had not been sick.

“I know that Amazon and other companies are getting extra money from the government to help their employees, but they are just keeping it. They just see us as numbers. If it wasn’t for the CDC or other basic regulations, they would do nothing at all to help us.”

Sara supports the formation of rank-and-file safety committees among Amazon workers, teachers, and autoworkers. “If they [Amazon] do not see us fighting they will keep setting us back by years,” she said. “Earlier generations fought for us to have safety regulations and make a decent living. We need to use social media pages to connect and speak out about the conditions now.”



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