

“When you work for Amazon, you pay for it emotionally, physically and mentally”

Sister denounces Amazon after death of Poushawn Brown, COVID tester at Virginia warehouse

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Christina Brown, a former Amazon worker, recently spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about her sister, Poushawn Brown, and their experiences working at the DDC3 warehouse in Springfield, Virginia. Poushawn, 38, died suddenly on January 8 of unexplained causes after working as a coronavirus tester at the Amazon facility.

“It hurts how the company has treated us,” Christina says. “There’s no medicine that can help with this situation. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts.”

Christina and Poushawn worked together as Amazon delivery drivers before taking jobs inside the DDC3 warehouse.

The sisters stopped working as delivery drivers after Christina’s car slid on ice into a barrier while she was under pressure to deliver groceries in winter, and her manager pressured her to make the delivery anyway. Once they began working inside the warehouse, Christina broke two different fingers on her right hand, on two separate occasions, while working as a picker. Amazon’s warehouses are notorious for their high rates of injury, with workers constantly under pressure to work at high speeds at the expense of their physical and mental health.

Christina has three sons that she is working to support, and who she wants to help achieve a college education. One wants to be a veterinarian. Another is studying to be a psychiatrist and plans to graduate next year. She also has a younger son who wants to be a neurologist. Poushawn leaves behind a twelve-year-old daughter.

Christina and Poushawn were very close, speaking by phone every day, often numerous times per day. “She never missed a graduation. She never missed a party, she was always there when I had my babies,” Christina says. The name Poushawn comes from the name of a village in Vietnam where, during the Vietnam War, her father was treated after he stepped on a land mine.

“Every holiday she cooked dinner,” Christina says. “Everything had to be perfect. She cooked dinner at least twice a week. She would make buttermilk chicken, pot roast, chicken noodle soup, all kinds of cakes, red velvet, pineapple upside down cakes, white cakes, coconut cakes. She could make anything. She was the best mother anyone could ask for. She was also an outstanding daughter.”

Together, Christina and Poushawn cared for their mother, who is 63 years old and has been confined to bed at home since 2017. At that

time, Poushawn quit her job as an administrative assistant began working for Amazon Flex to make sure that she could adjust her schedule to care for her mother. Christina also went to work for Amazon Flex in 2018.

Christina decided to quit working for Flex after the car accident. In an effort to avoid rear-ending another car on an icy road, her car slid into a ditch and hit a guardrail. When she called her supervisor, she was threatened with pay deductions if she did not complete her route and deliver the packages on time. She recalls saying to herself that her children could not lose their mother “for \$15 to \$40.” The next day she and Poushawn quit Amazon Flex.

The sisters began working instead inside the DDC3 warehouse in Springfield, Virginia, which forms part of a giant industrial complex that includes warehouses for Amazon Fresh, Amazon Prime, and Whole Foods.

Christina worked as a picker, which involves gathering products to be packaged and loaded onto the trucks for delivery. She recalls that her shift began at 5:15 in the morning, and she worked until 10:15. During that time she was expected to pick between 2,000 and 3,000 packages, which would consist of 6 to 8 delivery trips—or around one package every six to nine seconds.

She described this work as physically and spiritually harrowing. She recalls numerous incidents involving other workers being injured, and how these workers were denied meaningful compensation in the absence of witnesses. “When you work for Amazon, you pay for it emotionally, physically, and mentally.”

She recalls a young worker who broke her back while working as a picker, and Christina later found out that the worker was being paid only \$104 per week in compensation. “This woman literally broke her back! She has to walk with a limp and bent over for the rest of her life!”

Christina also remembers a man working next to her hurt himself. She had to run and get someone to help. He was escorted away and never returned.

When Christina was working as a picker she was injured twice. The first time, her pinky finger on her right hand was broken she while reaching onto a high shelf and her glove was caught on a protruding piece of metal while she was pulling out a heavy bag that weighed 80

to 100 pounds. The sensation was “intense,” she said, and she went to her doctor and the finger was re-set. After she was able to return to work, her ring finger of the same hand was broken in a similar manner.

In March of last year, Christina started wearing a mask on her own, but Amazon did not start providing masks until later, and temperature checks were not in place until June. She said, “There were no face shields, no suits, nothing!” She said she could talk for “three days” about “what happened during the pandemic with Amazon!”

Christina was working at Amazon after the police murder of George Floyd sparked widespread protests against police brutality. She was talking to another worker about what had happened when a manager came up to her and said: “You can’t talk about that here. If you do, you will be fired.”

Christina responded, “I was not speaking to you or saying anything about Amazon in relation to the murder of George Floyd or the Black Lives Matter movement. I have the right of freedom of speech.” The manager replied, “Well you can’t speak about those things in here.”

Not long after, Christina requested permission to leave work early one day to see her grandmother whose health was seriously deteriorating. Her supervisor told her she could not leave until her shift was over, saying, “I understand that people die all the time, but you just can’t leave until your shift is over!” That was the day Christina’s grandmother died. This was the last straw and Christina decided at that point to quit.

However, Poushawn continued to work at Amazon, and was assigned to work in the COVID testing department beginning in October. The position was offered in connection with a \$250 bonus that Christina does not believe that Poushawn ever received. Christina spoke with another worker who was also promised the bonus, who likewise has not received it.

This work was a source of friction between the sisters, which was extremely rare in their lifelong relationship. Christina was concerned that it increased the risk of their mother, whose condition remained critical, to infection from the coronavirus. Christina remembers telling Poushawn, “You have no business working in there.” The only PPE that was provided was a black mask with a check mark on the side and some black gloves, Christina said.

“She had no previous medical training,” Christina told her. “You’re not a doctor, a nurse, never been to medical school, never been an RN, an LPN, or any kind of medical professional of any kind.”

Christina recalls the events of January 6 well. As the fascistic mob incited by President Trump descended on the Capitol building in Washington D.C.—only a dozen miles from the warehouse—Christina called her sister in alarm and told her to come home immediately.

Poushawn said, “I just have a couple of people to test and then I’m coming home.” Christina replied, “That riot is happening just a couple of miles away from you. You never know what they’re going to do. They could come to that facility. You need to leave now,” she told her sister and Poushawn agreed.

The next day Christina called her to check on Poushawn at work and her sister said she had a headache. Christina asked her if it was a migraine but Poushawn said she did not know. Christina told her to get something to eat when she got home and rest. They talked for about an hour before they went to bed that night.

The next morning, Poushawn got up and got her daughter ready for school. She then got breakfast for everyone and laid down, never to wake up again.

Christina later called Poushawn’s house and did not get an answer,

which was unusual, so she asked her oldest son to go check on her. Her son called her to tell her that Poushawn was “asleep,” but when she did not respond to “Pou wake up,” he shook her, and she fell off the bed.

Christina told him to call 911 and raced to her sister’s house, driving her car barefoot, to find paramedics and police cars already there. Paramedics performed CPR, but it was too late. After a doctor pronounced Poushawn’s death, Christina and her son, in extreme distress, attempted to perform CPR themselves.

After it became clear that nothing could be done, Christina lay down on the floor next to her sister. Then she dressed her sister’s body in her favorite clothing, got in her car, and followed the vehicle containing the body to the funeral home.

Christina naturally suspected that her sister might have died from the coronavirus, since she had been working in a COVID testing unit at Amazon, but she was unable to get a clear answer. Because the death was not a homicide or a suicide, no official autopsy was performed, and the death was deemed the result of natural causes. A private autopsy would have cost \$7,000 to \$10,000, which she could not afford, and the time during which an autopsy would have yielded any helpful information quickly came and went.

Christina appealed to Amazon for help for an autopsy and a funeral, given that both sisters had worked for the company for years. But weeks went by without any reply from the company, which has a market capitalization of over \$1.6 trillion. Christina was “beyond hurt, sad, and disgusted,” she said.

After Christina turned to social media for help and received a warm response from fellow Amazon workers, management called her to offer “condolences” and two months of free grief counseling for her and for Poushawn’s daughter.

“Amazon didn’t get in touch with me until last Monday, which is February 1.” By then, the funeral had already taken place, and Christina suspects that management was coming under criticism from other workers for its callous indifference to the fact that a fellow worker had died.

Christina was gratified by the warm response of fellow Amazon workers on GoFundMe, who have contacted her privately with messages of sympathy and support. However, there is a culture of fear within the warehouses, she says, and workers afraid to speak out. “They’re scared. They’re terrified.”

The death of Poushawn Brown is a terrible tragedy, one with devastating and incalculable consequences for all of the people who loved her—and one in which the callous demand for unlimited profits at the expense of human life finds a particularly brutal expression. But Christina tells her fellow workers to find the courage to fight back—in memory of Poushawn.

“If you had her as a friend, you had her for the rest of her life,” Christina says. “She was an outstanding daughter. She was a hell of a mother. She was the best sister anyone could have had.”



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