

“Amazon puts profits above all else”

Amazon workers speak about stressful working conditions after suicide at Las Vegas warehouse

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Amazon workers from anywhere in the world, please share your comments about this tragedy, provide more information about workplace conditions and get involved with the fight to build independent rank-and-file committees by contacting us here.

Around 7:00 a.m. on Monday morning, March 1, Amazon worker Paul Vilscek committed suicide while on his shift at the LAS7 fulfillment center in Las Vegas, Nevada. The 48-year-old worker jumped to his death from the fourth-floor mezzanine inside the warehouse, as co-workers nearby watched in horror.

After initial speculation in the media that the death might have been accidental, the Clark County Coroner's Office on Tuesday confirmed that the death was a suicide.

After Vilscek's death, management kept workers on the job until 9:40 a.m. before sending them home with pay and offering grief counseling. One worker commented on Reddit, “They took nearly three hours to make the common sense, literally bare minimum decision, not to have people working in the area that their co-worker just died in.” Workers were expected to come to work the next morning as usual, and Amazon has said very little about the incident.

Two workers from the LAS7 and surrounding facilities spoke with the *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV) to share their thoughts in the aftermath of the tragedy. They have requested to remain anonymous out of concern over retaliation.

One co-worker said Paul was “really chatty and friendly.” She explained he “was also everywhere” doing a variety of tasks, like running the damage

department, problem solving, stowing and counting. He was a really dependable guy and very kind.”

While it is unclear what complex set of issues drove Paul to take his own life or what role his position at Amazon may have played, many Amazon workers mentioned the high-stress work environment and lack of compassion on the part of management.

“I will say management doesn't give a damn about mental health or so it seems,” one co-worker told the IAWV. “We are actively discouraged to interact with our fellow co-workers lest we be written up for ‘time off task.’”

She continued, “I have a history of severe depression and anxiety, along with a big 'ole dose of suicidal thoughts. And I've cried at work before, in front of them even, and they don't care. There is not a single moment where we aren't treated as numbers.”

Another worker in Las Vegas explained to the IAWV, “Never in my life have I heard of an employer being so unwilling to care for its employees. In my opinion, the poor man who died at LAS7 more than likely had these same issues with his situation. He had no support through his place of work, and what little time off we can take is held against us.

“This event really hit home to me,” he added, saying that he deals with severe anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress. He also related to a bad divorce that Paul was allegedly going through, a factor that may have contributed to his suicide.

“I am on a short-term disability leave due to my issues, but I was informed by a lead that the time I'm taking off can cause me to be one of the first names on

the list when layoffs come around. This gives me more anxiety. It's a vicious, unrelenting cycle."

When asked what is behind the lack of consideration for mental health issues, he replied, "Amazon puts profits above all else. I'm quite new there and can tell you this with 100% certainty."

Like those who spoke with the IAWV, workers in Las Vegas and across the United States have utilized social media channels as a way to grieve, send condolences to those affected, relate their own stories to the event and express anger at the way management has handled the situation.

On Reddit, a worker wrote: "I worked in an Amazon warehouse for 3 years. There were definitely several times I contemplated it from the fourth floor. I was just afraid it wasn't high enough."

To which another responded: "I don't know how you made it that long. I was there a couple weeks and it was so redundant it was sickening. It felt like jail or prison or something. Two fifteen-minute breaks but they're really only ten minutes because you have to walk to the breakroom. Ten-hour days. Then Back to Work! Human beings aren't meant to live like that."

Another worker wrote: "It's honestly so sad how emotionally and physically draining this job is and no one listens to us, but we're trapped working there cause hardly anyone pays around this much and we can't quit, it's gotten to the point where people actually take their lives and it's heartbreaking."

Mental health issues are commonplace in the 21st century, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented social crisis that has been triggered by it. On the same day of Paul's suicide in Las Vegas, a Chicago postal worker hanged herself in her delivery van.

According to a February report by Kaiser Family Foundation, "During the pandemic, about 4 in 10 adults in the US have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, a share that has been largely consistent, up from one in ten adults who reported these symptoms from January to June 2019."

Even before the pandemic, mental health disorders and suicides were on the rise. A *Washington Post* article from January 2020, entitled "More Americans are killing themselves at work," commented on data released by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. "The number of such suicides for 2018 was 304," the author

wrote, which is "an 11 percent increase from the year before and the highest number since the bureau began tracking the data 26 years ago."

The worsening social conditions and inequality that lay in the backdrop of these grotesque numbers are especially concentrated in Amazon, where workers are forced to push their physical and mental capacity over the edge in order to sustain the megaprofits of executives and financial investors. Many Amazon workers experience injuries, burnout and severe mental issues. In 2019, *The Daily Beast* calculated that within a five-year period between 2013 and 2018, there were at least 189 "suicide attempts, suicidal thoughts and other mental health episodes" at Amazon warehouses.

The tragedy in Las Vegas is reminiscent of the spate of suicides at Foxconn in China involving workers making iPhones and other electronics. At least 18 workers who faced brutal conditions took their own lives, prompting the company to put up suicide nets on its buildings.

These conditions can only be fought by uniting Amazon workers through the formation of independent rank-and-file committees to oppose the corporate dictatorship in the workplaces and fight for workers to exert their control over wages, working conditions, health and safety.



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