

Young UK worker speaks to WSWS about exploitative conditions for Amazon delivery drivers

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Geoff, a young worker from Peterborough, England has spoken to the *World Socialist Web Site* on his experiences delivering Amazon parcels.

Geoff had a short stint with two different companies delivering for Amazon. His experiences mirror those of many workers trying to make a living in this corner of the gig economy in the middle of a pandemic.

Amazon is universally known for two reasons: That its owner is the richest man in the world with a net worth of well over \$200 billion, and because its brutal working conditions where health and safety are compromised. Conditions in its fulfilment centres are the epitome of wage slavery.

Amazon uses the latest technologies to streamline its logistics operation to the nth degree. It has created a vast international apparatus in which human labour is subject to brutal exploitation.

Amazon's business model, centred on eking out every last penny in profit, is followed through from the time it receives an order to delivery. Amazon comprises a network in every country involving hundreds of small businesses and tens of thousands of drivers to deliver millions of parcels to customers every day. This has been constantly maximised to the point that same day delivery is now standard practice.

The last mile delivery in this operation is the most expensive part. The parcel needs to be hand delivered to the individual customer. This takes lots of people and lots of time.

Amazon organises this work mainly by using two different methods. One is called 'Amazon Flex'. This uses private drivers working self-employed as independent contractors. The drivers' book in blocks of time via an Amazon app to deliver parcels and get paid

for this time. They are not eligible for any other pay, such as holiday or sick pay and are fully responsible for the running cost of their vehicles.

The other last mile delivery method used by the corporation is 'Amazon Delivery Service Partners'. These are companies set up by Amazon by offering start up finance to establish small business partners. These service partners organise delivery vans and hire drivers to deliver Amazon parcels to the customer. This means Amazon is not responsible for dealing with any payments to delivery workers, nor for the running of delivery vans or the working conditions and levels of pay set by the individual company.

Geoff experienced working with two such delivery service providers for Amazon. He started at the first after providing a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check and attending a training course over two afternoons "to teach me all of the aspects of the job. The instruction videos were extremely Americanised, with no relevant information regarding procedure in the UK."

"I was told that shifts were 10:00-19:00 and even if you haven't finished by 19:00 your shift was over, so you could simply return undelivered parcels to the depot in Peterborough. While technically true, as the contract says I have the right to refuse any work I find unreasonable, I was told multiple times to pick up work from other drivers close to or even after 19:00 with no extra pay incentive. I was also threatened to have my pay slashed, or even taken completely, if I did not do extra work past 19:00".

Geoff was told that he would be gradually introduced to the job but soon had to take on a full-time shift making 140 to 180 drops which are too many to deliver

within the normal span of the shift. “This is impossible, so most drivers will continue to work until 20:00, 21:00h and later for no extra pay. I have seen drivers work until 23:30 at night for no extra pay.

“Also, drivers are legally required to take a 30-minute break every six hours. The app will pop up, telling you that it is time for a break. This can be dismissed with no consequences and will not appear again for the rest of the day. Managers will not flag you to take a break even if you have worked over six hours.

“There are no employee rights. By having all workers register as self-employed, they are able to circumvent holiday pay and sick pay. This means you have to work out your own expenses, incoming and outgoing, as well as hire a van. There are no workers’ protections; if you don’t work, you don’t get paid. I was made aware of a worker who crashed his van mid-shift one day, and because he did not complete the route was not paid at all for the day, including the several hours he had worked before having the crash.”

Geoff highlighted problems he encountered regarding wages due to him.

Work at both companies was almost identical. On a usual day he had to pick up a van an hour earlier from a specified location, then he had to be at the Amazon warehouse to load the van. Official working hours started at the warehouse, so the first hour was unpaid.

“I had no major problems with pay from the first company, although on three of my five pay days I had to chase it up with head office because it was not processed on time.”

This was not true of Geoff’s second employer. “I had to hire a van for £225 per week. I had to pay for fuel, AdBlue, oil and maintenance for the van. My first pay was supposed to be on the third Friday after joining. However, the day before I was made to sign a document agreeing not to be paid the full amount but only ‘an advance’. As I needed the money, I signed the document. Later that day, my contract was cancelled without any explanation. I spent more than £400 of my own money on diesel for the van and yet I was told that I would be paid in five weeks’ time. In the end I got my money after seven weeks.”

“Every other driver I spoke to while delivering for Amazon service providers had similar horror stories. Almost every day there were threats that employees pay would be docked or not paid at all for uncompleted

routes. Anyone who challenged this would be humiliated.

“I received this kind of treatment myself. After a disagreement with a manager, 30 to 40 co-workers were gathered around me to be publicly shamed. Those who spoke up and said when something was not right were never around for very long.”

Geoff said that at both companies, his contract was terminated without any explanation given.

Asked if he had tried other jobs in the gig economy, he answered, “I did try to look for other gig economy jobs. Once I’d started realising the extent of the mistreatment and wrongdoing at Amazon, I realised that any other gig economy job in the same wheelhouse is almost certainly more of the same. I am not interested in working part-time and I don’t believe employers should treat employees so poorly that people are getting two, three, four, sometimes five jobs just to have the same standard of living as someone with one job only a few decades ago”.

The International Amazon Workers Voice newsletter is assisting workers in the building of an interconnected network of committees of Amazon and logistics workers, as well as autoworkers, educators, and workers in other key industries.



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