

Baltimore Amazon worker describes “week of hell” during Prime Week 2021

Nick Barrickman, Tre Johnson
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On June 21 and 22, Amazon held its annual “Prime Week,” a 48-hour online shopping extravaganza in which numerous one-time deals are offered to encourage massive turnout among the commercial giant’s Prime subscribers.

In recent years, the event has been promoted as a quasi-“holiday” in which the public receives unbelievable offers from the supposedly magnanimous corporation while company shareholders get to enjoy their rising stock portfolios.

Due to the pandemic, last year’s Prime Week was delayed until October. As the *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV) wrote during last year’s event, while “Prime Day is a time of breakneck speedup and forced overtime for Amazon workers,” it means “record sales each year for the company.”

Despite this supposed precaution of postponing the 2020 Prime Day, the impact of holding the event in October as COVID-19 cases rose last fall undoubtedly led to numerous super spreaders throughout the company’s logistics hubs. According to an in-house report released in the lead-up to Prime Week last October, 20,000 Amazonians had become infected throughout the course of the first months of 2020. This report, nearly a year old, is to date the only publicly available account of the number of COVID-19 cases at Amazon facilities in the United States.

“Prime Week [this year] started way before” June 21, stated a Baltimore Amazon worker at the BWI2 facility. “We’d been preparing for it weeks and weeks ahead of time.” During Prime Week, workers are given Mandatory Extended Time, or “MET” in order to meet the requirements for the shipments Amazon makes.

“We go from 40 hours per-week to over 55 hours a week,” he said. “Stowers have been working with MET for even longer.” According to a description posted at Indeed.com, the stowing position is “very strenuous” with

“lots of up and downs on a ladder.” Another worker simply says as “soon as you walk inside it feels and sounds like depression.”

On top of the sheer length of the work day, Amazon workers cope with numerous personal health and safety problems due to technical breakdowns. “We have conveyor belt problems,” the Baltimore worker said, adding that BWI2 has “had them for years.” When a conveyor belt gets bottlenecked, an entire picking station may go down for a time. This places even more pressure on workers who are in a fight against Amazon’s rate system to move product quickly.

These technical mishaps are compounded by the fact that Amazon’s automated system is programmed to blame the worker for “time off task” until a viable excuse can be provided. According to an in-depth *New York Times* investigation last month, “If productivity flag[s], Amazon’s computers assumed the worker was to blame.” The company routinely fires its lowest performing employees.

The worker continued: “On a normal day, you’ll have 12 picking stations available [per floor]. Each station has two people doing a three-person job. This means you will have 24 people doing pick.” During Prime Week, the flood of inventory forces a fulfillment center to open at least a dozen more “manual” picking stations. “In between being understaffed, having people who are untrained working with you,” to the threat of coronavirus and burnout, “it’s hell,” said the worker. “A week of hell.”

“When a station stops, management tries to pull people” off the momentarily-defunct picking station, sending them to different departments. “Then the station will start back up” with even fewer pickers. “It’s like a tug of war,” he said. “I’m experienced, so they may ask me to be in two places at one time.”

Prime Week in 2021 came just weeks after Amazon

announced that it would allow workers with proof of vaccination to drop wearing their masks. This policy came weeks after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced similar guidelines. The subsequent quitting of basic public health safety has set the stage for a fourth surge of COVID-19, this time with the exceedingly deadly Delta variant.

“It’s impossible to walk into different departments [at BWI2 fulfillment center] and not infect people” if you are infected, the worker said. “All you need is a supervisor to catch COVID-19, and everybody that works under them will have it too.”

“To this day I know one person the company ever contacted about a potential exposure, and that was because they hadn’t been wearing their mask,” he said. The worker offered up the image of “a tree trunk covered in ants” to describe how “the floor of Amazon during Prime Week looks.”

While workers were faced with impossible situations on the warehouse floor, the event was an unmitigated success for Amazon’s CEO and shareholders.

According to Adobe Analytics, total e-commerce sales at the online shopping giant last month totaled over \$10 billion for the 48-hour period. CNBC, which cited Adobe’s research, said: “Sales during the first 24 hours of Amazon’s megasale, which kicked off at 3 a.m. ET on Monday, are set to surpass \$5.6 billion, representing 8.7 percent growth year over year.” According to Adobe, the two-day event brought in Amazon’s highest gross so far in 2021.

The spending frenzies over the past several Prime events have led to massive surges in wealth for Amazon’s until-recent CEO, Jeffrey Bezos. As the IAWV reported last year, Bezos added \$10 billion to his personal wealth during Prime Week in 2020. This outstripped his previous takings in 2019, where the corporation’s founder raked in \$7.9 billion.

Forbes reported recently that Bezos has done well after he stepped down from his role earlier this month as Amazon’s chief executive. Last week, the former-CEO’s stock wealth increased by \$10.6 billion after Amazon’s stock shot up with the news that the US Department of Defense was reopening bids for a contract to build out the Pentagon’s cloud systems. The Amazon mogul is now worth an estimated \$212.4 billion.

Reports *Forbes*: “Bezos spent part of his first week of freedom from Amazon’s day-to-day operations mingling with billionaires and power brokers in Sun Valley, Idaho, where he was spotted with his girlfriend Lauren

Sanchez.”

“The annual retreat in the resort town attracted at least 25 billionaires worth a collective \$825 billion,” the business publication adds.

This was followed up with by Bezos’ recent brief trip into outer space this past Tuesday. At a press conference afterwards, Bezos let slip more than he intended when he thanked Amazon workers for “paying for all this.”

The scenario depicted by workers in Baltimore and the pro-corporate press confirms what the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in its perspective in 2017, “Amazon Jobs Day: A Tale of Two Americas”:

“On the one hand there is Amazon, a corporation awash in cash, always expanding its monopoly, producing ever greater dividends for shareholders. [On the other hand,] Living conditions are deteriorating for the working class [and] former industrial hubs ... are now being transformed into industrial parks for low-pay, low-benefit warehouse work.”

In response to these conditions, workers in industries across the world are forming a network of independent rank-and-file committees, dedicated to uniting workers in a common struggle against capitalist inequality.

The formation of such a committee at the Volvo Trucks New River Valley plant in rural Virginia was a key element in the rebellion against both the company and the United Auto Workers. The Volvo Workers Rank and File Committee (VWRFC) led the fight to reject a trio of sell-out concessions offers, forcing the union to call multiple strikes and resort to blatantly forcing through a contract rejected by the majority of workers.

In Baltimore, workers at BWI2 formed a rank and file committee last year to defend coworkers from the brutal exploitation and unsafe conditions at the company. In response to the Volvo struggle, the committee declared: “The present struggle, like the global pandemic, has demonstrated that workers have to unite collectively to defend themselves against the capitalist system, as it acknowledges no barriers in its pursuit to exploit us.”

The IAWV calls on all Amazon workers to get in touch with the WSWS to find out how to join such a committee today.



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