

Former Spanish Amazon worker, fired for injury, abandoned by unions

Our reporters
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The *International Amazon Workers Voice* spoke to José Antonio Rueda Bermudez, a former Amazon worker in Spain who sued Amazon after suffering a workplace injury in July 2015. José told his story: how he was abandoned by the unions and the pseudo-left Podemos party, and how his injury and Amazon's refusal to grant paid sick leave and disability have devastated his life and that of his family.

José is 34 years old and married with a 13-year-old daughter. In November 2014 he started to work at Amazon's San Fernando de Henares fulfillment centre outside Madrid as a picker—a worker who picks up orders, scans them with a picking “gun,” and sends them to delivery platforms.

Like most Amazon workers in Spain, he was hired through a temporary employment contracting firm—in his case, Manpower ETT. “I was on weekly contracts until the day I had an accident,” he told the WSW.

That day, his job was changed to “final inspection, which is where I had to pick up packages. We had to be three people doing the picking. One bringing pallets and the others unloading. Well, that day we were two people... Two people in final inspection. We didn't have time to pick up packages. A package came that was 30 by 30 centimetres and inside it had something incredibly heavy. I had to bend over with the package and as I did, I felt and heard a ripping sound coming from my back as if you were grabbing some jeans and ripping them apart.” He was only 28 years old at the time.

Amazon management sent him to Mutua Universal, a health insurance company that works with Spain's Social Security system to provide healthcare aid to workers injured on the job. Insurance companies like these collaborate with big business to ensure workers are back to work as soon as possible, and if injured,

receive as little compensation as possible.

Mutua Universal told José he had low back pain, or lumbago, without even properly looking at him. “And there the story begins,” José said. The insurance sent him back to work three times. A doctor later diagnosed him with sacroiliitis, an inflammation of the sacroiliac joints where the lower spine and pelvis connect.

José explains how he was abandoned by the unions: “Workers Commissions [CCOO], the UGT [General Union of Workers] and the CSIF [Central Independent Trade Union] said they would help me, but the only thing they did was to gather information. They would call me to their offices, ask me about my court cases I had against Amazon and Mutua. They asked me for information, I would tell them, ‘Well, look, I have filed this and this complaint.’”

José suspects that their questions aimed to gather information about the lawsuits he launched against Amazon soon after his injury, and that the information was passed on to the company. He said, “They took this information from me, I don't know why, maybe for the company, and they haven't helped me at all. I am still waiting for the food they told me they would collect since 2015, and we are in 2021. If I were to have depended on them to eat, then I would be more dead than alive.”

Podemos also refused to help. Bermudez sent videos of his case to then-Podemos leaders Pablo Iglesias and Iñigo Errejón, but they never replied: “And one day, I see Iglesias shaking hands with the union representative who promised to help me outside of the plant... That really hurt me... they ignored my situation and that of my family and health. They could have helped me in those days, and I might be even healthy today. Instead, I'm physically worn out.”

José has been in and out of courts for the past six

years. He won the first case against Amazon, forcing the company to recognise his accident as workplace injury, which they had previously denied. Amazon claimed Bermudez didn't work with them and was a contractor. Now José is fighting in the courts to be recognised as permanently disabled, and is also suing for compensation for the workplace injury.

José's injury exposes the brutal character of temporary and contract work, commonly used by Amazon across the world. With union complicity, they enforce lax safety protections and force workers to work themselves to the brink of exhaustion out of fear that Amazon will not renew their contracts. Unemployment has life-shattering consequences.

José has gone through three evictions with his teenage daughter: "Life has totally changed for me." The family survives with the salary of one person, José's wife, and some assistance from family members.

On top of this, he is being harassed by the health care insurance company on behalf of its client, Amazon. José said, "We have private detectives at home. They have been chasing us for six years ... as if we were criminals." He claims that they have manipulated reports to claim that José is now a farmer because he waters a small plot of land with vegetables.

His situation has worsened under the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government. Its austerity policy devastated workers like José, whose family lives from his wife's €1,200 (\$1,411) monthly wage. The extreme cold in early 2021 saw his monthly electricity bill rise to €200. "Imagine with one salary... it's not enough to reach the end of the month... Pablo Iglesias promised to lower the price of electricity. Look today. With COVID-19 things got only worse, we had to stay at home and literally freeze at home. Even then we had to pay 200 euros."

The PSOE-Podemos has allowed a handful of energy companies to determine market prices. Last June, the government passed a new measure to increase electricity prices, already among the highest in Europe, as part of the promises made to the European Union in exchange for EU corporate and bank bailouts.

José is barely covering costs. "We cannot even cover basic needs." His physical state has deteriorated over the years. "My injury started in my right hip, on the right side, now I have it on both sides, and it is also

damaging my spine and neck." Sometimes, he tells us, "I can't get dressed. I am totally disabled."

José expressed his anger and contempt for Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos' flight into space: "I saw the video of how Bezos was leaving yesterday in the spacecraft, and I felt, well, that in that rocket was my health and my money, which have been stolen from me... worst of all was the interview he gave afterwards where he said that it had all been paid for by workers ... and people applauding him, and giggling. This is totally disrespectful."

Discussing the recent Volvo strike, José drew parallels with Amazon, saying that "these are strong companies with a lot of power. Workers need to struggle united... The workers have the real strength, not big business. Without workers, those businessmen cannot have their lavish lifestyles." The unions, he added, "play a duplicitous role."

Asked about the need to build a Spanish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), José said "its urgently necessary, but it has to necessarily defend the people. It should have no link to the other parties, the PP, Vox and Podemos... these forces have no links to workers' struggles."

He said his hopes in Podemos have been dashed. He criticized their obsession with gender and racial identity politics and imperialist regime change operations, even as tens of thousands of workers are maimed by the capitalist system: "This is going to explode. I'm just one of many who have been affected, and then they are all day talking about [recent protests in] Cuba, the Transsexual Law. They are hiding the bigger problems. They channel our anger to other issues... this cannot continue in the 21st century."



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