

Adding COVID to injury: Salt Lake City Amazon worker injured on the job, then contracts coronavirus

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Jane, an Amazon worker at the SLC1 warehouse in Salt Lake City, Utah, was seriously injured and then contracted COVID, all within the space of 30 days.

She sustained a major injury on the job over the summer. She was pressured to resume working before her injury could fully heal, aggravating the injury and prolonging her recovery, and within a month she had contracted COVID on top of the injury.

Did she think she caught the virus at Amazon? “I’m positive I did,” Jane says, pointing to an ongoing runaway chain of infections at the warehouse.

Jane’s harrowing experience occurred as Amazon, which is infamous for unsafe work conditions and high rates of injuries, has ramped up work speeds back to pre-pandemic levels and as cases spiral out of control.

Her name has been altered to protect her from retaliation, and some details of her story have been omitted to make it more difficult for management to identify her as the source for this article. It is an open secret that Amazon maintains an entire department, called Amazon Global Security Operations, to spy and report on its workers.

Jane began working at Amazon around the time the pandemic started. Before working there, she worked at a warehouse for a chain of outdoor sporting goods stores. She was enticed to switch jobs by Amazon’s “perks,” but she says she now regrets the decision.

As an “essential worker,” Jane worked at Amazon throughout the pandemic. She recounted how in the early days of the pandemic, workers stayed at their posts, with masks being distributed and certain minimal safety measures being implemented, followed by a period during which the company embraced “reopening the economy” and the mask requirements were abandoned. Recently, the wearing of masks has resumed.

At the early stages of the pandemic, Amazon implemented a small wage hike to keep workers coming to work and then callously withdrew the pay raise once enough workers had returned to regular shifts.

The SLC1 warehouse was only recently opened in 2017, with \$5.6 million being handed over to Amazon by the state government in the form of tax breaks as an incentive to “create jobs” in the community. According to one report, the new warehouse employs 1,500 workers.

Like all Amazon warehouses, the work is repetitive and physically punishing, with the company’s characteristically extreme psychological pressure being brought to bear on workers to always work as fast as possible. “Hard on body,” one former worker wrote simply in an online review.

SLC1 warehouse workers are now contracting COVID at an alarming rate. It is Amazon’s practice to send vague “notifications” to workers whenever a co-worker tests positive for COVID-19. These notifications do not indicate how many workers were infected or which worker or

workers specifically were infected. The net impact is to prevent workers from having the necessary information to make their own judgments about the safety of the workplace and to lull workers into a false sense of security.

At the same time, Jane noticed that some of the notifications appear to refer to a single worker, while others refer to “employees” in the plural. The plural “employees” could mean two, five, 10 or 20 workers.

To take one recent series of notifications as an example, Amazon sent Jane COVID notifications on September 17 (referring to “an employee” testing positive), September 18 (“employees”), September 19 (“an employee”), September 20 (“employees”), September 21 (“employees”) and September 22 (“employees”). That points to at least 10—and likely much more than 10—COVID infections among Jane’s coworkers in the space of less than a week.

As this cascade of infections unfolded, the warehouse was not closed for cleaning, and business continued as usual, even as the number of infections continued to mount.

The runaway infections continue to this day. “Almost every day I get at least one notification,” Jane says. “These are vaccinated people getting sick. There are a lot of vaccinated people.”

She was sharply critical of what passes for coronavirus safety precautions in the warehouse. “They are not cleaning the stations like they are saying,” she says. “They are not pushing social distancing. They are doing nothing to clean the stations in between shifts.

“When the pandemic first hit, they hired extra people to come clean. When the face mask thing got lifted, then they just stopped doing it. All that went away. Now there are just disinfecting wipes on some of the stations. Now that we are really getting hit with COVID, they are not even doing what they were doing last year.”

Jane was seriously injured over the summer while performing a task that she had specifically flagged as unsafe. The specifics are not included in this article to prevent management from identifying her. Rather than call an ambulance for what was clearly a major injury, Amazon shuffled her through its bureaucratic on-site medical station, which could not treat the injury, before dispatching her to an off-site doctor’s office, where she waited two hours without the doctor seeing her.

“This guy was a quack. That’s what I think he was. I was the only injured person in there. They were doing drug screens and physicals. I’m bleeding here! Don’t you think I would be a priority?”

Delirious from the pain, she waited patiently for two hours while other patients were seen ahead of her, before confronting the receptionist in exasperation and demanding to be seen. “I was swearing. I was bleeding a lot. It was a pre-employment medical center; it was not an emergency care place. This is the doctor they send everybody to.”

She ultimately refused to allow that doctor to treat her, mistrusting with

good reason the entire process. She eventually sought treatment elsewhere. “I would have been more comfortable being treated by a veterinarian than by that so-called doctor. They sent me back to work before the inside [of the wound] was healed. It wasn’t even healed! Why would you throw someone on full duty when something’s not healed? I don’t get it.”

During her recovery from this injury, Jane was shuffled into the scandalously corrupt and anti-worker “workers’ compensation” system, with which hundreds of thousands of Amazon workers have already had bitter experiences.

The *International Amazon Workers Voice* has previously reported how, for all intents and purposes, the “workers’ compensation” systems in American states have been captured by the corporations and the insurance companies, which routinely refuse to provide adequate care, drown workers and medical providers in paperwork and procedural red tape, and bully workers back to work as fast as possible.

In one case reported by the IAWV, Amazon’s claims administrator hired private detectives to spy on and photograph an injured worker in an attempt to undermine her claim for compensation.

The number of serious injuries at Amazon warehouses is extremely high, even in an industry in which a steady toll of mangled bodies is the norm. At one warehouse in Texas employing between 3,500 and 5,000 workers, 567 workers were seriously injured over one two-year period.

“They will tape you up and patch you up and stop the bleeding, and then back to work. It’s not about anybody’s safety. It makes me mad just to think about it,” Jane says.

Amazon refused to pay Jane for the time spent traveling to and from distant doctor’s appointments. Meanwhile, the doctors quickly declared her fit to return to work with no accommodations. Shortly after returning to work, she contracted COVID, adding insult to injury.

The virus was miserable, she says, like nothing she had experienced before. “I still don’t have my smell back. My taste comes off and on. But I am always coughing up stuff. I’m short of breath,” she says. “The headaches lasted throughout the whole thing. And they got worse towards the end.”

Now her daily life is a struggle to get medical care through the “workers’ compensation” system, fighting uphill paperwork battles to get treatment for her injury. She calls the system a “circle of frauds.” A recent prescription was not “pre-authorized” by the claims administration bureaucracy, so she had to pay for the medicine out of pocket and apply for reimbursement. She was only able to get the reimbursement, she thinks, when a local pharmacist intervened on her behalf.

With her injury not fully healed and still weak from COVID, she struggled to finish Amazon’s back-breaking shifts, during which workers are expected to perform tasks as often as every six seconds. “I would work until I was in tears,” she says, “until the pain was so bad, I couldn’t work anymore. I used up all my [unpaid] UPT time.”

When she saw the company medical staff in the warehouse, they merely gave her painkillers and wrapped her injury in bandages so she could get back to work. These on-site medical staff have clear conflicts of interest, since they are employed in a warehouse owned by a company that has a financial interest in minimizing workers’ injuries and maximizing their productivity.

“They would try wrapping it,” Jane says. “I would take a big dose of Tylenol.” She would try to focus on performing her tasks quickly to block out the pain of the injury. “My brain thinks if I work faster, it will be over quicker,” she says. “But obviously it doesn’t get you out sooner.”

Could she go home when the pain became unbearable? No, not without being punished with subtractions to her limited quota of unpaid “UPT” time. The doctors cleared her to go back to work “full duty” Jane was told, and so was expected to work without accommodations or restrictions. This meant working Amazon’s “mandatory” 55-hour work

week even as her injury swelled up and the pain became excruciating.

Jane would come home so tired from her shift that when she put her young child to bed, she would fall asleep first. Last week, her injury swelled up and became so painful that she could not continue working, and she instead went to see a specialist. This specialist advised her that the premature return to work had aggravated her injury substantially, resulting in a buildup of scar tissue and a much more protracted and painful recovery period.

She contacted the *International Amazon Workers Voice* because she felt that what was happening was unjust. “I’ve never been so frustrated,” she says.

Jane was stoic throughout the interview, but her voice broke when she spoke about her family, and about how when her two year old was sick and that she could not stay home with her because Amazon had docked her all of her “UPT time” when her injury became too painful for her to continue working. It has been a struggle, she says. In the midst of everything, her heater at her house went out.

She is a believer in safety, “especially gloves,” and she always did what she could to keep other workers safe. “I try to keep people as safe as I can,” she says. Now she tells other Amazon workers, “You do not want to get injured here. You do not want to go through workers’ compensation here.”

Like many workers in a notoriously unsafe industry where injuries are rampant, Jane was injured at a previous job. “I got injured there, and they paid for everything,” she recalls. “They took care of me. I couldn’t understand how Amazon could treat me this way. They don’t give a crap. I’m just their slave, I pretty much feel like [that].

“I’m just dumbfounded about this whole thing. Now I have to work overtime just so I can pay my bills for my family?”

As part of Amazon’s workplace “gamification” technique, Jane recalls how during the pandemic she was required to compete with fellow workers to see who could work the fastest. This is the company’s method for getting workers to work harder without giving them any additional pay or benefits. Jane was once ranked as Amazon’s fastest stower in America on at least one day. It was hard work to be “number one stower in the nation,” she says. “That’s hard to do.”

Now that she is injured, Amazon could not care less about its “top performer,” Jane says. “I guess it is true my injury doesn’t benefit them, so pretty much f— me.

“This whole workers’ comp thing is just saving the employer’s ass,” she says. “It’s not helping the employees out. It’s screwing them over. I can see why people don’t report injuries. They don’t want to deal with this.”

Jane continues to go to work at Amazon, often clocking overtime to try to make enough to pay the bills, but she seethes under the surface. “I don’t feel safe in there,” she says. “It’s a relief when you walk out. Every day I go to work I hate that place more and more.

“Amazon is about the employers, not about the employees,” she says. Jane encourages the readers of the *International Amazon Workers’ Voice* to share her story and to continue exposing the conditions they face.

There are now almost a million Amazon workers in the United States, representing about one out of every 150 American workers, and 1.3 million worldwide.



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