

# Injured Amazon worker in Florida denied workers' compensation and threatened with termination

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An Amazon worker at the company's TPA1's fulfillment center location in Ruskin, Florida, spoke to the *International Amazon Workers Voice* recently about her experience working at the facility. What was revealed was a brutal and abusive workplace environment, including systematic efforts by the company to victimize injured workers and force them back into work to maintain the company's arduous production quotas.

In an interview with the WSWWS, the worker, who chose to go by the pseudonym Lauren to protect herself from retaliation, testified to a horrific bureaucratic regime that's found in virtually every Amazon facility in the country, with workers being injured, forced back to work, and eventually terminated once they've no longer served any use to a company known for its super-exploitation of its workforce. Injuries at TPA1 are rampant, where it's common for five or six workers to get hurt on a typical day. Management routinely intimidates workers who raise health grievances and demand treatment, with most coerced into returning to work or facing termination.

Lauren reported suffering from her injuries with the company for nearly a year, being consistently denied medical attention and forced to work at the same position. Now, she faces imminent termination after months of battling with Amazon's byzantine workers' compensation systems.

"After you get injured," Lauren explained, "they don't send you to a doctor or fill out paperwork even if you tell them you're hurt. If you ask them to see a doctor, they say 'it's not that bad, get back to work.' If you ask for paperwork and see a doctor, they coerce you by threatening not to pay you, keep you from the warehouse or just fire you."

## Injuries begin soon after starting work

Lauren's injuries first began piling up in early March shortly after getting hired at the warehouse as a picker. Pickers are responsible for gathering products and preparing the shipment, including labeling various types of merchandise and maintaining sufficient stock capacities.

"That's the area with the most injuries," she said. Pickers are tasked with lifting, unloading, and stacking a wide array of products, such as Coca-Cola packages, diapers, Gatorade and frying pans, most of them ranging from mildly heavy to excruciatingly bulky sizes. In addition to having to stand and walk for hours without rest, pickers must lift products into the holes of machines or robots to process their products. "Pickers have to open the hole in the robot with one hand and put the entire item in with that hand, no matter how heavy it is."

Countless workers have complained of being tired and muscle-strained

after doing such strenuous work repetitively for hours. "I always suggest to the managers that workers be allowed to rotate their positions so they don't get hurt as much. People are always injured and in pain because of this material they have to handle. Workers are not offered supplies by management and are forced to buy their own equipment for their knees, elbows, and back to prevent injuries."

Despite injuring her arm in the early months of 2020, Lauren wasn't able to consult with an orthopedic physician for treatment until the summer. "The long delay was due to the caseworker taking incredibly long to authorize medical treatment," she said.

At first, she was directed to the company's on-site emergency clinic, Amcare, for an initial observation. "When you get injured, they send you to a regular doctor through Amcare," she said. "But Amcare doesn't have any legitimate doctors; the people working there don't have any medical title. Some of them are security people, etc. They don't have nurses or any physicians."

Although she constantly demanded to be seen by a doctor, the Amcare officials overseeing her case repeatedly declined to fill out the required paperwork for a doctor's visit. "They just say to go home, stay home for a week, and if you are fine then come back. If you insist on filling it out, they suggest working somewhere else until you feel better. If you insist again, they get angry and give you an attitude."

"So I was forced to go back to work but my hand injury worsened and I started feeling a lot of pain in my hands and wrists." Over time the job became impossible because of her injured hand.

"I had to open up a robot that we use to put Amazon's products in with one hand and lift the item with the other hand. With one hand I open up a hole inside the robot, pull an elastic band back, and with the other hand put the item inside that hole. I did that all day for 10 to 12 hours each day, which caused so much discomfort. I only have three seconds to put smaller items in, 10 seconds for medium sized ones, and 15 seconds to put large, heavier items in. In all, I'm supposed to put 30 different items inside that one hole."

Even though she was in awful pain, she felt pressured to speed up her activity to meet Amazon's rigid rate system and avoid punishments from management for not meeting quotas. "If you don't satisfy their quota, you get reprimanded each time you mess up. First time is a talking-to, second is a verbal warning, third is a written warning, and your fourth time is termination."

While Amcare forced her to work even with the hand injuries, she had to readjust how she worked to compensate for this trouble, which eventually led to her neck injury. "After I got the neck injury, I knew it was serious and needed to see someone. I kept on complaining to my managers and they finally gave in and sent me to an Amazon specialist in June, after three months."

## A bureaucratic nightmare with Sedgwick

A laborious process then ensued with Amazon's workers' compensation department, ran by the insurance company Sedgwick. Other Amazon injured workers have previously spoken to the WSWs about their horror stories dealing with Sedgwick, which has gone so far as to hire private investigators to surveil workers.

Upon seeing a specialist, they performed an MRI on her neck, which had gotten seriously strained from overwork. The next day, however, Sedgwick closed her case and said that the injury didn't happen at work. "I was so shocked and confused," she said. "The Amcare person said 'sorry, we already closed the case, go back to your area and keep working.' They basically told me I had to go see a personal doctor because workers comp said they won't cover that [her injury] because they closed the case. But they gave no reason or explanation. I kept on telling them 'no this happened at work,' but once again they reiterated that workers comp closed the case."

After being informed that her case was closed, she was placed on unpaid time off and sought a more thorough medical diagnosis on her own. "Ever since then, I've made several appointments with another doctor outside of Amazon and they've found all sorts of issues with my neck. The most recent doctor that I saw was from late last September, and they confirmed that my injuries happened at work. I went to a specialist for the neck and they recommended seeing another one for my hands. They told me I had a herniated disk on my neck and all types of problems on my hand because I was lifting things too heavy for them."

A few weeks ago, Lauren was called in to work for the first time since the middle of summer and was given light work to perform. "I was not in my regular area and was just doing temperature checks for people coming into the building, to check for symptoms of COVID-19. But I still needed to get reimbursed for the time I spent away from work. They agreed to put me on UPT, but didn't pay me anything, and I had proof now that I actually got injured at work."

However, Sedgwick and Amazon's injury caseworkers repeatedly stonewalled her attempts at reimbursement throughout the months she was placed on personal leave. "I sent three letters to Sedgwick saying it happened at work and didn't get a reply. I called Amazon's workers comp directly and I was forced to send several more letters. Anywhere from July until this past Friday, I was waiting for Sedgwick to get a second opinion from their approved doctors. I have medical paperwork with evidence that they were workplace injuries."

Recently, the claims department for Amazon informed her that she must provide a medical notice documenting proof of her injuries through an authorized company doctor or face imminent termination. "They're threatening to fire me unless I give them proof that me using my vacation time was actually from a workplace injury. But they don't want to accept any medical documents from a specialist outside Amcare. Before, when I was requesting reimbursement I kept hearing 'it's your personal doctor and has nothing to do with us so just take personal leave.' Now they were considering firing me for the same reason."

Following a couple days of doing other minor tasks, her managers forced her to return back to the same injury-prone position as a picker despite still being injured. "My medical restrictions were violated. When I got hurt again, I was sent back to work with no restrictions. I got hurt again and went to Amcare and they did not want to send me to a doctor. My limitation was not to lift anything heavier than 10 pounds, and this wasn't followed at all.

"I complained again of being hurt and they sent me to a company doctor

and this one gave me restrictions for five pounds. A third doctor told me I shouldn't be using my hands whatsoever. I also ended up hurting another part of my body. It came to a point where they couldn't do anything but have me doing light work because of my complaints. I don't know how long that'll last."

### "They treat people like they're animals in cages"

"When I first walked into the building and saw all the fancy technology and cameras, I thought they were there to protect the employees," Lauren said, "but now I know the only reason they have this stuff is to watch us and control us like we're robots; just like the machines they use to make everything.

"In the marketing and advertising used to attract employees, they make it seem like you'll be treated like family and be happy working here. But it's all a fantasy. In reality, they treat people like they're animals in cages and it's completely different than what I thought.

"From the company owners all the way down to the managers, they present themselves as superior; their 'ranks' make them better than regular workers even though we as workers produce everything and do all the heavy lifting. They treat workers like they're nothing and worthless. They promote competition among the employees. They would like to have people from different countries and backgrounds and languages who can't relate or communicate with each other so that everyone is separate. If management notices you are communicating with someone you're familiar with, they take you out of that group and isolate you so you can't speak to anyone. If you get hurt on the job, Amcare, human resources, and so on treat you like you're just a bother.

"In the end, they don't see you as a person, it's all marketing," she said. "They don't have respect for human dignity, you're treated no different than animals. Once you get hurt and stop producing their profits, they don't want you there. Being there is like being in jail, and to be honest, it's worse than being a slave."

*The International Amazon Workers Voice (IAWV) is assisting Amazon workers in forming a network of rank-and-file committees to fight for safe working conditions, higher wages, and other worker needs. We urge Amazon workers to contact the IAWV about forming a rank-and-file committee or to share your own story.*



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