

Life and Death in the Warehouse: A gruesome depiction of relentless exploitation

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Screen writer and author Helen Black's drama *Life and Death in the Warehouse* (available on BBC iPlayer) shines a light on conditions for workers in the UK (and global) warehouse industry.

Director Joseph Bullman's inspiration for the drama came through a discussion with a group of workers in Wales while working on another documentary. He realized the workers were waiting for text messages to confirm if they would be given a shift at the warehouse at the bottom of the hill. Some were unable to get to the warehouse quickly enough, losing out on a day's work. Their solution was to sleep at the local bus shelter to respond quicker to the call to work.

The drama is based on real-life events and real workers' experiences. The BAFTA-winning team have previously created *Killed by My Debt* (2018) and *Murdered by My Father* (2016). Black grew up in Yorkshire in a working-class family. Her father was a miner and her mother worked in local shops. In a BBC interview, she commented, "There aren't many working class writers, there aren't many working class directors, there aren't many working class producers. So it's rare that you get a team together that wants to tell working class stories."

Following extensive research with UK warehouse workers, the drama for the most part successfully brings these experiences to life.

The story is told chiefly from the vantage point of a junior manager rather than an order picker. This decision provides the opportunity to see the company's relentless drive for profits at the expense of a high turnover of—and physical damage to—workers. The perspective also reveals the ideological brutality of capitalism on those it elevates and deploys to administer its exploitation. This is best captured in the post-incident debrief exchange for the junior

management team: "We need to be desperate to please our customers"—"I am 100 percent desperate..."

Alys (Poppy Lee Friar) and Megan (Aimee-Ffion Edwards) lived on the same street in Wales in their younger years, meeting up again as they are waiting to go into work. Alys is a permanent picker with a long-standing record and Megan is starting on the management training programme. Both actors manage to invoke feelings of sympathy for their individual situations, despite the worker/manager conflict existing between them.

The opening scenes show the horror of Alys miscarrying her pregnancy in the warehouse toilets with Megan looking on in a state of shock. This quickly moves back to the beginning of the story as staff line up to enter the warehouse through the various security protocols, more akin to entering a secure prison than a place of work. The "Temporary work desk" deals with desperate workers seeking daily employment, refusing to offer shifts if workers have previously failed to meet picking targets.

Megan quickly learns the company's Orwellian "customer fixated" mantra means management will go to any lengths to dehumanise the pickers to meet ever-more demanding targets. No consideration is to be given to a picker's height, age or health conditions, including pregnancy. Failure to meet targets results in the loss of a job.

Despite Alys advising the company of her pregnancy, her request for lighter duties is declined and she is placed on "Personal Enhancement Plan" when she cannot meet her daily pick rate. This is a euphemism for being "managed out" of the business.

Under pressure to perform and keep her job, Alys continues working despite suffering with high blood pressure (due to the pregnancy) and at one stage passes

out. Megan, concerned for her wellbeing, calls an ambulance. She is reprimanded by her manager colleagues and superiors for “taking the easy way out, not what is best for the team.” Danny (Craig Parkinson), the Senior Manager, and his junior sidekick Donna (Kimberly Nixon) are droid-like characters, seeming to lack any empathy for the workers. They are the smiling assassins in Megan’s work-life. Despite her best efforts to remain “human,” she must meet the requirements of the corporation. Her evolution into a replica of Danny and Donna is evident by the end of the drama.

Megan, from a working-class background and bringing in the only income in her family, is as desperate to keep her job as Alys, so continues pushing Alys to improve her performance. In a similar manner to call centers, every second of the pickers’ day is monitored. Idle time, which includes toilet breaks, should be kept to the minimum, which results in male employee urinating in bottles and leaving them around the warehouse rather than lose time using the toilet facilities. Female workers unable to do the same and managing monthly cycles and pregnancy must race to use toilet facilities as quickly as possible and are then publicly humiliated in front of the entire team when they take longer than 10 minutes.

These vast distribution centers have often sprung up in depressed areas such as ex-mining villages. This creates the conditions for super-exploitation, with low numbers of jobs and high reserves of labour. Desperate temporary workers are eager to earn the “green vest” of permanent employment, pushing themselves to exhaustion to prove their “worth”—with one temporary worker consuming dangerously high levels of energy drinks pumped with sugar and caffeine, as well as taking energy supplements.

COVID-19 comes up briefly during a team meeting. While the writers have selected the issue of pregnancy rights as the main narrative, it is unfortunate that more attention was not given to this issue. Warehouse staff have been on the frontline of the pandemic. Designated as “key workers,” they continued working in enclosed spaces with COVID running rife in distribution centers. This has been a fundamental experience of the broader working class in “key worker” roles and more could have been made of this.

The script points to the hostility of the company to

union activity. This has to do with management’s resistance to any self-organisation on the part of the workers and is about maintaining a workforce of individuals rather than a collective force. However, the recent drive to unionise Amazon workers, supported by US President Joe Biden, shows the turn being made by the ruling class to utilize the corporatist unions to control this increasingly critical section of the working class.

Once the unions are in place, as the broader experiences of supermarket distribution and warehouse workers in the UK shows, low wages, terrible working conditions and exploitation remain the norm.



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