

OSHA opens investigation of Amazon warehouses after three New Jersey workers die on the job over three-week period

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The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) announced early last week that it has opened investigations into Amazon's New Jersey facilities after three worker deaths were reported in a three-week span. The results will not be announced until the completion of the investigation, which could take up to six months.

In the span of just three weeks, three workers employed at three different Amazon warehouse facilities in New Jersey died while on the job. Each of these tragic deaths further exposes the horrendous working conditions faced by workers at Amazon and offers yet another illustration of the gross exploitation and callous indifference to life that characterizes the entire logistics industry.

The first death occurred on July 13, the last day of Amazon's two-day Prime Week, the biggest Prime Day event in the company's history. Then, 42-year-old Rafael Reynaldo Mota Frias collapsed at the EWR9 warehouse in Carteret, New Jersey, and was later pronounced dead. According to friends, he was "a hard-working dad...who was everything to this family."

Several other workers employed at the fulfillment center told *NBC News* that the deceased worked as a "waterspider"—a physically demanding job involving pushing carts loaded down with goods to various workstations across the warehouse—and had been working on an upper floor of the facility, known for its extreme heat. The temperature in Carteret on July 13 reached 92 degrees Fahrenheit.

For over seven years, Prime Day has consistently resulted in record-breaking sales for Amazon, which rakes in billions of dollars by pushing workers past the limits of physical and mental exertion with breakneck speedups and forced overtime. The corporation recently reported that its profits have improved by 40 percent following a lull in June.

According to *Seeking Alpha*, website [the] has followed quarterly results that showed better than expected revenue and better revenue guidance" from the corporation, a euphemism for increased exploitation of the workforce.

Eleven days later, on July 24, a worker at Amazon's PNE5 warehouse in Robbinsville sustained fatal injuries in a workplace accident. Early that morning, the worker reportedly fell from a three-foot ladder and struck his head in an open docking bay. The worker was taken to the Capital Health Regional Medical Center in Trenton and died three days later. On August 4, an Amazon worker at the company's DEY6 delivery station facility in Monroe Township died on the job.

For the most part, very little information regarding the three deaths has been released. "The new Occupational Health and Safety Administration investigations are putting fresh scrutiny on Amazon's injury rates and workplace-safety procedures, which have long been criticized by labor and safety advocates as inadequate," remarked a local ABC News affiliate.

Most details, including the workers' names and the causes of each death, have been withheld from Amazon workers and the general public. OSHA has claimed the ongoing investigations prevent it from releasing more information.

OSHA, significantly understaffed and underfunded, has done little to restrain the criminality of the ruling class in its relentless drive for profits. According to a 2021 report by the US Labor Department Office of the Inspector General (OIG), OSHA conducted 50 percent fewer on-site inspections and issued fewer than 300 COVID safety violations in 2020 as COVID ripped through workplaces. This even though complaints about workplace conditions increased by 15 percent and state workplace safety

agencies issued five times as many citations and fines.

In 2020, OSHA actually rewrote its rules regarding COVID reporting to essentially give employers a blank check to allow the spread of the virus among workers.

In those rare cases in which OSHA has ruled against a company, it lets these multimillion- and billion-dollar corporations go free with minimal fines (a couple thousand dollars) and mere recommendations for improving working conditions. In late April, OSHA ruled that Amazon's DLI4 facility in Illinois, which collapsed during a massive tornado in December, "met minimal safety guidelines for storm sheltering," despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

The agency announced that it would not hold Amazon liable for the deaths of six workers; all were forced to remain on the job despite the known danger. OSHA simply recommended that Amazon "voluntarily take the necessary steps to eliminate or materially reduce your employees' exposure to the risk factors described above."

The agency takes its orders from the Democratic Biden administration, which, contrary to all Joe Biden's campaign promises, has continued and expanded upon the criminal, reactionary policies of his far-right predecessor.

Amazon announced that it is conducting its own inquiries into the two most recent deaths. Company spokesman Sam Stephenson offered a perfunctory response, stating the company was "deeply saddened by the passing of one of our colleagues and offer our condolences to his family and friends during this difficult time."

Stephenson added, "As is standard protocol, we are conducting an internal investigation and are cooperating with OSHA, who is also conducting their own independent review." The company conducted an "internal investigation" into the first death in mid-July. Unsurprisingly, the inquiry concluded that the death "was not a work-related incident, and instead was related to a personal medical condition."

The self-serving proclamation is contradicted by reports from workers at the facility. One Reddit user, who indicated they worked in EWR9, wrote in response to a post announcing the first worker's death, "I am here to confirm this is true...the am care people/ safety didn't know how to do CPR." The worker said that "if they did CPR on him he would have lived, He went and complained about the heat and they tried to help him and told him to go back to work. Most likely gave him an ice pack. I came in the building today and they have over 50 brand new heavy duty fans after [OSHA] came yesterday

morning as well."

The three workers in New Jersey have joined the ranks of the tens of thousands of Amazon workers maimed and killed on the job every year in the multibillion-dollar company's pursuit of profits. According to a report by the Strategic Organizing Center, in 2021, Amazon employed "one-third of all warehouse workers in the U.S., but it was responsible for nearly one-half (49 percent) of all injuries in the warehouse industry." The injury rate at Amazon warehouses is reported to be twice as high as the rate at non-Amazon warehouses in the logistics industry.

According to a recent report by the New Jersey Policy Perspective think tank, in New Jersey, where Amazon operates over 50 facilities and employs around 40,000 workers, the overall injury rate at Amazon's warehouses increased by 54.3 percent in 2021 compared to 2020. In 2021, Amazon accounted for 47.3 percent of employment in New Jersey's warehouse and storage industry but 57.2 percent of serious injuries in this sector.

This gross exploitation has provoked opposition from the workforce. In the last two weeks, British Amazon workers have mounted a series of wildcat strikes at facilities in opposition to low pay amid rising inflation levels. On Monday, Amazon workers in San Bernardino, California, mounted a walkout over safety as well as low pay at the region's air freight hub.

Other corporations have similarly deplorable records. On June 25, United Parcel Service(UPS) driver Esteban Chavez, Jr., 24 years old, collapsed inside his delivery van from heatstroke while working and later died. A UPS driver in New York City was reprimanded for taking a 47-second break to sip water amidst an intense heat wave.

The fight to ensure an end to avoidable workplace deaths and injuries requires that workers take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file safety committees to wage a determined struggle against the intolerable conditions created by the profit system. These committees must fight to unite Amazon workers across all warehouses, with all other logistic workers, with workers across all industries, and workers around the world.



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