

# Fired over a bathroom break: Amazon worker with debilitating Long COVID fired for publicly exposing management's abuses

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The *World Socialist Web Site's* International Amazon Workers' Voice recently spoke at length with Josh, a former Amazon worker in upstate New York who was terminated for distributing union literature at his workplace. His experience demonstrates the culture of repression which has been fostered throughout America's corporations while workers are treated like industrial slaves.

Josh's Twitter postings leading up to his removal show Amazon's authoritarian actions. The 40-year old's Twitter postings about the BUF9 warehouse have gone viral. One tweet, published on August 28, explains that he "got in trouble" for defying a rule which forces a worker to "get permission" from a manager in order to go to the bathroom. The posting has been shared over 25,000 times.

"Today amazon gave me a verbal warning about going to the bathroom while not on break," he said. "They denied me so I went anyway and I got in trouble. I think I have [to quit]. It's inhumane," he says. Not long after this, Josh said he was chased off of Amazon's grounds by security as he was handing out union leaflets in his break room.

Josh explained this situation to the IAWV. "About two weeks ago [Amazon] held a meeting explaining that there would be no bathroom breaks unless you see a PA [Process Assistant]."

This new procedure requires Amazon workers to seek out the nearest available PA, of which there is "maybe one per thousand people" on the floor at any given moment, in a warehouse "the size of a shopping mall."

Amazon, the logistics behemoth which expanded its industrial and corporate net value to over \$1 trillion during the pandemic, is notorious for its "dystopian" and pervasive system of control in each of its warehouses.

Workers are greeted to a wrap-around system of surveillance and monitoring designed to track their speed and efficiency and stifle their slightest efforts to organize and defend themselves.

"The atomization of the warehouses... the layout and algorithms seemed almost designed to isolate employees from one another," states Alec MacGillis in *Fulfillment*, a book about Amazon published in 2020.

Amazon's abuses were not only cruel, but illegal. A 2021 California state law stipulates that the operators of "warehouse distribution centers" cannot enforce rules which prevent "compliance with meal or rest periods, use of bathroom facilities, including reasonable travel time to and from bathroom facilities, or occupational health and safety laws." This, however, is exactly what occurs throughout Amazon's hundreds of warehouses.

When Josh defied this new rule and his exposures went viral on social media, management began to target him. This included direct attacks on him online and in person.

"Vice News, Business Insider, all contacted me," he said. "They also all contacted Amazon," thus alerting the company to his posts. Prior to having security chase him from Amazon's premises, "my boss brought me into his office. He shut the door and made sure there was no one watching. He had all the news information," he said.

Having had Amazon's abuses publicly exposed, the official sought a "compromise" with the worker. "He said if I wanted to go to the bathroom, I could come and tell him in his office" directly. Josh refused this offer on principle. This began the threats and intimidation.

"Amazon [managers] replied to my personal Twitter," he said. "They were calling me 'stupid,' all sorts of names." Josh recalled one official approaching him in person and confirming his online conduct. "One guy who identified himself as a manager came up to me in the

warehouse,” he explained. “He had claimed that I gave him a [union] flier. He also stated that ‘one-half’” of the building’s management had replied to his Twitter post.

“I was fired verbally,” he explained, stating that his boss had security chase him from the building. In mid-September, Josh received documentation that he had been terminated.

“This letter confirms that the date of involuntary termination of your employment with Amazon Services LLC is September 11, 2022,” it states. No further details were provided relating to the cause of the firing.

Attempts to appeal to the state for support proved useless. According to the worker, the local office of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) “laughed” at his requests to open a case against the employer.

“I called OSHA. It took many calls. It seems there is just one guy that handles all cases apparently in this area,” he said. The lone OSHA representative “was mad that I didn’t have any phone numbers for them, but Amazon doesn’t give us a number. That got him very mad. I had to call back a few times until he agreed to open a case. I don’t know if they actually did and I’ve never heard back from them.”

“It seemed like a joke the whole process. They [OSHA] just refused to help me. I don’t have any case number or anything, and they never called back or sent anything.”

Josh had fallen into a system which is overwhelmingly stacked in the favor of the corporation and for which there are few avenues for appeal. According to the National Employment Law Project, “OSHA’s response to the thousands upon thousands of complaints it has received [during the pandemic] from terrified workers around the country alleging employers are not following safe infection control practices, has been feeble.”

“There is little the agency can do,” says the report, which was published April 2020. “Despite a promise by the Trump administration that the number of workplace safety and health inspectors would increase by 2019, the OSHA now has the lowest number of on-board inspectors in the last 45 years.” The report states “At this staffing level, it would take the agency a whopping 165 years to inspect each workplace under its jurisdiction just once.”

This situation hasn’t improved substantially under the Biden administration. In June, the National Council on Occupational Safety and Health sent an open letter to the House Appropriations Committee citing a “lack of consistent and aggressive enforcement of existing safety laws” alongside the “ever greater threats? posed by the

COVID-19 pandemic, heat and weather crises and other pressing developments. The national groups call for an additional \$100 million in yearly funds to OSHA, among other things.

The letter cites an April 2022 AFL-CIO report which classifies “Transportation and warehousing” as one of the country’s most dangerous industries.

The Biden administration provided a derisory \$20 million funding increase to OSHA last year, a mere a drop in the bucket toward what could be considered bare minimum level of adequate funding for the agency.

For Josh, the question of workplace safety has increased importance. The young worker’s struggles with debilitating Long COVID have also attracted considerable attention on social media.

“I have bad asthma,” he explains. “I used to have issues with it before, but never to the point where I required an inhaler.”

Like many suffering from this multi-system and debilitating disease, Josh is unable to exercise anymore. “I am 40 years old, but have the lungs of an 80-year old. My insurance won’t cover [the cost of inhalers and treatment]. Before COVID-19, the stores are always ‘out of stock.’ I currently have four ‘puffs’ left in my inhaler to get me through tomorrow.”

“COVID-19 ruined my life. Before, I was studying nature and horticulture. Now, I’m hoping I won’t be forced to sell my house,” due to the combined impact of loss of the job alongside the victimization that occurred at the hands of Amazon.



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