

Under conditions of murderous exploitation, a worker dies at Amazon in Leipzig, Germany

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As the early shift neared its end, a worker collapsed while sorting packages. Cardboard was placed around the body as a screen, and operations continued as usual. This is how several Amazon employees reported what they had seen.

On August 15, an Amazon employee died while working at the logistics centre in Leipzig. The case only recently became public knowledge. Journalists from *Correctiv* came across the case when they were researching abuses at the logistics giant in cooperation with several local newspapers.

There had already been a fatal accident at Amazon Gernsheim previously this year, in June. During maintenance work at around half past twelve at night, a 42-year-old man was buried alive by a falling conveyor belt. After being freed by the fire department and resuscitated on site, he died a day later in hospital.

In the US, government investigations are currently underway after three workers died in three weeks at Amazon warehouses in New Jersey.

These deaths shine a spotlight on the fatal consequences of Amazon's exploitative working conditions.

One Amazon worker, who wished to remain anonymous, estimated that the deceased was "in his mid to late 40s." He had to sort several hundred packages an hour into containers, the heaviest weighing more than 20 kilograms. After a half-hour break, work would continue nonstop.

Works council member Thomas Rigol told *Junge Welt* that many workers take painkillers before starting their shift. A logistics worker walks at least 15 kilometres every day, which is almost the length of a half-marathon.

Amazon claims it "locked down the workstations" following the worker's death, shut down the conveyor

belts, and gave all staff the option of going home with pay. However, this offer apparently did not go over well with the workers. According to Rigol, a member of the Verdi union, such offers did exist, but at the time it was not clear whether this was paid or unpaid and whether the promise applied to everyone, according to *Junge Welt*.

Amazon did not comment on the question of why shift operations were not stopped that day.

Amazon's indifference to workers' lives and health is not new. Last December, six US workers died at the Edwardsville, Illinois fulfilment centre because Amazon refused to stop work despite tornado warnings. "Amazon won't let us go," read the final text message sent by one of the deceased to his significant other.

The company is also indifferent to the risk posed by coronavirus, accepting mass infections. For example, in April 2021, the TV magazine programme "Panorama" reported that Amazon banned its employees at the Winsen site in Lower Saxony from protecting themselves at work by wearing FFP2 masks. Only less effective disposable medical masks were allowed. At Amazon Leipzig, FFP2 masks were not explicitly banned, but the company refused to pay for the mandatory breaks.

Amazon workers in the US and other countries reacted against this profits-before-lives policy with strikes and protests.

By its own account, Amazon employs more than 20,000 permanent workers at its logistics sites in Germany. In Leipzig alone, there are more than 1,000.

Andreas, with whom *Correctiv* spoke about the death, is one of them. "I have to bend over to pick almost every second item," he says. The worst, he says, are mini dishwashers or ovens that he must heave up by himself. Especially if they're stored on lower shelves.

He says the goods sometimes weigh 17 kilos.

If Andreas does not move for five minutes, his hand scanner sounds an alarm. A timer counts down, second by second. Anyone who does not continue working in time is kicked out of the system. As a result, they may be assigned to another route afterwards and must continue working in another area of the hall.

“For employees who need to use the restroom longer or have limitations, it’s difficult to manage time-wise,” Andreas says. The company acknowledges that you must sign off in advance to avoid something like this. But pressure is applied when the “pick rate” drops.

A worker who previously spoke to the WSWs about the conditions at Amazon Leipzig several years ago reported that work accidents and even strokes are blamed on the workers themselves, who have bonus points deducted by management. Since the bonus is always team-related, Amazon uses it to pressure workers to control and outdo each other.

Another means of extortion is fixed-term contracts. Workers hope to gain permanent employment if they perform better. The whole Amazon system resembles the famous trick with the carrot held in front of the donkey’s nose to drive it to perform better.

Correctiv has also investigated Amazon’s logistics system, where even more exploitative conditions prevail in some cases. To make itself independent of large logistics companies such as DHL and UPS and to reduce costs, Amazon relies on small subcontractors over whom it has complete control. It often disregards workers’ rights, such as break regulations, and pays low wages. Long waits, tight schedules, work pressure and fatigue increase the risk of accidents.

The expansion of the global Amazon corporation has received massive government funding. For the Amazon site in Leipzig alone, created in 2006, around €14 million in state subsidies flowed from the federal and state governments. The expansion of the Bad Hersfeld site, which took place at the same time, was subsidized by the state of Hesse to the tune of €670,000. Years later, Leipzig Mayor Burkhard Jung (Social Democratic Party) called Amazon an “unprecedented success story in creating new jobs.”

Amazon, owned by Jeff Bezos, one of the two richest men in the world, reported a global profit of \$33.36 billion in 2021. Despite that, in mid-November the company announced it would cut about 10,000 jobs

worldwide. In the face of rising energy prices and an escalating global economic crisis, this is likely just the beginning of a massive wave of attacks on Amazon workers, who are already squeezed dry by the company.



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