

US Labor Department levies paltry \$60,000 fine against Amazon for “failing to keep workers safe”

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In a January 18 press release, the US Department of Labor announced it was levying a derisory \$60,269 fine against the mega-corporation Amazon following safety inspections of three Amazon warehouses last year in New Windsor, New York; Waukegan, Illinois; and Deltona, Florida.

In their press release, the DOL said Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA) inspectors found that workers laboring at Amazon warehouses were at a “high risk for lower back injuries and other musculoskeletal disorders related to the high frequency with which workers are required to lift packages and other items.”

As part of their investigation, OSHA “reviewed on-site injury logs ... and discovered that Amazon warehouse workers experienced high rates of musculoskeletal disorders.”

In their report, OSHA said these “serious” violations of the 1970 Occupational Safety and Health Act were “likely to cause serious physical harm to employees, in that employees were required to perform tasks resulting in stressors that had caused, were causing, or were likely to cause musculoskeletal disorders (MSD).”

Because of the “heavy weight of the items; awkward postures, such as twisting, bending and long reaches while lifting; and long hours required to complete assigned tasks,” the DOL found that Amazon workers were at a higher risk for severe injuries, such as strains, sprains and carpal tunnel syndrome, as well as lower back injuries.

“Each of these inspections found work processes that were designed for speed but not safety, and they resulted in serious worker injuries,” said Assistant Secretary for Occupational Safety and Health Doug Parker in a statement.

For subjecting thousands of workers across the United States to “serious physical harm” and life-long medical ailments, OSHA proposed three separate \$15,625 fines, totaling \$46,875.

OSHA investigators also discovered that material at the Amazon warehouse in Florida was not stacked in a safe manner to prevent sliding and collapse, unnecessarily exposing workers to “struck-by” hazards. The government proposed another \$13,394 penalty for this violation, bringing the grand total to just over \$60,000.

The infinitesimal fines proposed by the government agency will do nothing to deter Amazon from continuing its abusive practices which have maimed and injured thousands of workers for years, while making Amazon shareholders extremely wealthy. For Amazon, the latest fine is just the “cost of doing business.”

Reflecting the value that Amazon and the US government place on workers’ safety and health, the proposed fine is less than a fraction of a hundred-thousandth of Amazon’s current \$1 trillion market

capitalization (the current stock price multiplied by the number of shares). The proposed fine represents roughly 0.01 percent of the value of Jeff Bezos new \$500 million superyacht.

The announcement of the fine comes the same month as UNI Global Union, a “global union federation,” released its second annual report on Amazon’s abusive surveillance and monitoring regime, titled, “Life in the Amazon Panopticon: An international survey of Amazon Workers.”

In 2022, UNI Global Union, in conjunction with Jarrow Insights, surveyed 2,000 Amazon workers from eight different countries: United States, United Kingdom, Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and Australia. Their survey found that the hellish and unsafe conditions detailed in the DOL’s latest meager fine of Amazon is not relegated to a few warehouses in the United States, but standard operating procedure across Amazon warehouses, delivery networks and even at office buildings, around the world.

The results showed that a “majority of workers surveyed expressed their belief that Amazon’s monitoring of their work performance is excessive and opaque, that its expectations are unrealistic, and that striving to meet these unrealistic expectations has negative effects on their physical health and, even more acutely, their mental health.”

In March 2021, Amazon confirmed that it was requiring delivery workers to install company spyware in their smartphones called “Mentor,” which tracks their location both on and, in some reported cases, off the job. This was followed by another announcement that Amazon would be installing camera systems from a company called Netradyme in drivers’ vehicles, which record “100 percent of the time.”

While management claimed these systems are to “improve driver safety,” worker interviews and the survey results demonstrate that they are in place to pressure workers to perform at the highest possible speeds. Similar surveillance and tracking systems, already in place inside Amazon warehouses, require workers to perform tasks, perfectly, repeatedly, in as little as every six to nine seconds.

Corporations like Amazon utilize advanced technology and spyware not to ensure the safety of workers, but to discourage socializing and chill free speech among co-workers—especially in opposition to unsafe working conditions and poor wages.

The survey found that 51.7 percent of Amazon workers “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that Amazon’s constant monitoring of work performance negatively impacted their physical health. Even more, 57.3 percent said it negatively affected mental health.

In the United Kingdom, where Amazon workers struck earlier this

week for higher wages and better working conditions, one worker told the WSWs that workers “have been treated like battery chickens.”

In the survey, workers described the various tools/programs Amazon managers use to track their every movement from physical devices like hand scanners, badges, in-vehicle cameras and GPS devices, to software, which workers are forced to use like the aforementioned “Mentor” and “Chime.”

“Being overworked and underpaid trying to reach nearly impossible goals and metrics is degrading. We have to be perfect to keep our job,” one US delivery driver reported.

“They demand more production every day, and they decrease the number of employees,” a Spanish warehouse worker said, while a US warehouse worker said they felt “rushed to make my rate and half-way through the work week I’m exhausted.”

“It’s outrageous that you can work at a ridiculous pace trying to keep up with Amazon’s demands, only for your manager to come after your shift and point out that you accidentally scanned 2 packages out of the 2,000 you handled into the wrong bag (which the system rejected anyway),” reported a German warehouse worker.

Over half the workers surveyed (54.2 percent) said Amazon’s productivity targets were either “difficult” or “very difficult” to achieve, compared to only 17.9 percent who said they were either “easy” or “very easy” to meet.

One US tech worker said since he started working at Amazon, “I now have consistent migraines.”

Exposing as a lie Amazon’s claims that the constant monitoring of workers is not for safety, but as a tool of management to speed up workers, a US delivery driver reported he got “an infraction because I was having an asthma attack on the highway and needed to reach into my bag to grab my inhaler. It logged it as distracted driving.”

A UK warehouse worker explained they were “harassed for not reaching my targets,” after returning to work following two surgeries on their wrists. “Now I’m off work again as my carpal tunnel returned and extended to nerve entrapment in elbow.”

In addition to physical strain, workers in the survey reported immense psychological stress not only from laboring at Amazon under the dystopian surveillance regime, but also because of the fear of unemployment due to being unable to constantly meet higher rate and quotas. Over half of workers surveyed said working at Amazon had a “negative impact on their mental health,” including over 66 percent of Amazon workers surveyed from Poland.

Workers described the dehumanization they feel working at the multinational corporation. A Polish warehouse worker said, “The system can’t treat people like this ... we work with robots, but we aren’t robots ourselves.”

The Amazon regime is “Relentless on humans, they take us for animals,” testified a French delivery driver.

The atmosphere cultivated at Amazon is not a mistake. In a 1998 shareholder letter cited in the report, former Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos wrote, “I constantly remind our employees to be afraid, to wake up every morning terrified.”

An Amazon delivery driver from northern Illinois interviewed by the WSWs detailed his normal working day and the extreme pressures, thanks to the “terror” regime of Bezos and shareholders, Amazon delivery drivers are subjected to.

“I’m an Amazon step-van driver in northern Illinois. I deliver between 300 and 400 packages a day with 170 to 210 stops. According to my DSP [Delivery Service Partner], I’m one of their best. I work very hard to get done early and as a result, I only work

about 32 hours a week on average but am still paid for 40. Sounds like a sweet deal.

“But this job eats people up. My ankles and knees and back can only do this for so long. Every day I’m afraid my foot will catch the step when I’m jumping in and out of the truck and I’ll eat dirt and break something. And if you want to finish early, you have to take that risk almost 200 times a day.

“When I was rescuing one of my coworkers (another ‘top driver’), he was behind by 50 stops because he had to deliver to a bunch of office buildings that were closed for a holiday. Amazon forces you to try each of these deliveries twice. Dispatch asked me to take 15 stops off him. When he heard I was only taking 15, he broke down. He yelled, “I’m not a f...ing robot,” as he punched the door of his van in frustration. I took 40 stops to help him out. My boss chewed me out for it at the end of the day, even though we both finished on time.”

The worker said that while, “Amazon and my DSP love to hold me up as an example, I’m always one fall away from being worthless to my bosses.”

Pointing towards the objective necessity of uniting Amazon workers across jobs and national boundaries to implement safe working conditions, the Illinois delivery driver said, “If drivers want any chance at better working conditions, we can’t do it divided by the arbitrary legal lines of the DSP system. Drivers and warehouse workers have a shared interest in safer working conditions, more time off, and having more control over their working conditions.”

The International Amazon Workers Voice is assisting workers in building a network of rank-and-file committees in the warehouses and terminals to establish lines of communication between workers at different work locations and organize collective resistance against the sacrifice of workers’ lives and limbs for corporate profit. These committees assert workers’ control over pick rates and delivery rates, and organize strike action against any threats to the health and safety of workers.

As the Illinois driver concluded, “A rank-and-file committee of drivers and warehouse workers can stand up to Amazon and the DSP bosses.”



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