

Amazon worker in Canada, forced outside in freezing conditions during fire alarm, dies of heart attack

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The death of a worker at an Amazon fulfillment centre in Talbotville, near London, Ontario on January 14 has prompted an investigation by the provincial Ministry of Labour.

A fire alarm necessitated the evacuation of the facility into the bitter cold at approximately 11:10 p.m. while employees were working on the night shift. Fire crews responded and, according to the company, allowed workers back into the facility less than 20 minutes later. However, Environment Canada reported wind-chill values of -25 Celsius at the time.

About an hour later, Paulo DeSouza Bezerra collapsed near his work station. It remains unclear if exposure to severe cold was directly related to his death. Emergency crews were unable to save Bezerra's life. According to his obituary, he succumbed to a heart attack. Bezerra, 50, who emigrated from Brazil, leaves behind his wife of 25 years and a young son.

A coworker who was at the scene of the tragedy disputed the length of time employees were out in the cold, saying it was longer than the time reported by the company. While Amazon said employees were provided with cold-weather kits as they exited the building, including blankets, hats, gloves and socks, the same coworker said there were not enough blankets for everyone. Additionally, the worker said some workers tried to stay warm inside a vehicle, but a supervisor ordered them out twice.

Amazon has not disclosed what function Bezerra performed at the facility. However, one worker said the Talbotville facility is a high-pressure workplace with strict performance targets. Speaking to the *London Free Press*, the worker described the job of picker as "relentless," with the target to handle 350 items per hour. Those who receive shipments at the facility must handle items that can be very heavy over 10-hour shifts. Workers are discouraged from leaving their work stations unless absolutely necessary and even then for no more than five minutes. There are constant appeals to sign up for overtime shifts.

The highly automated Talbotville fulfillment centre is, in fact, one of the flagship operations in Amazon's global network. Spread over 2.8 million square feet on four floors, the facility dedicates 75 percent of that space to robotics to process and sort packages, largely for delivery in the Greater Toronto Area.

The facility utilizes Amazon's Sparrow robots, which are able to identify, sort, pick up and place items with great precision and accuracy. These robots still require human intervention for some functions, but the capitalist necessity to maximize the machine's efficiency drives the pace of operations. The facility provides a perfect example of how technological developments that could reduce the burden of grueling work for human beings is used, under the control of the capitalist profit system, to intensify the exploitation of workers in order to extract ever higher profits for Amazon.

This dynamic has been at work since the beginning of the capitalist era, which was set into motion in conjunction with the industrial revolution. What seems particularly portentous about the current situation is how the state of affairs for the working class increasingly resembles that of Victorian industrialism. The concessions granted by the ruling class in the face of bitter working class struggles and on the basis of the post-war boom in North America that allowed workers some degree of social progress are well and truly over. As at the height of Victorian industrial exploitation, tycoons like Jeff Bezos, Amazon's founder and former CEO, sit atop unprecedented fortunes gleaned from the use of advances in technology to intensify worker exploitation, driving many to early graves.

As is typical, the Amazon facility was hailed by governments at all levels as a great boon for Southern Ontario that would replace what was once a thriving industrial operation that offered well-paid, secure positions and which generated scores of spinoff jobs.

The fulfillment centre was constructed on the site of the former Ford Talbotville assembly plant, which closed in

2011 after 44 years. That plant, which once employed some 3,600 workers, has been replaced by a distribution centre that offers low-paid precarious work handling goods manufactured in another part of the world where pay and working conditions are even more advantageous to the profit-seekers.

What was originally touted as an exciting enterprise with dazzling technology that would employ more than 2,000 workers is in fact a warehouse that pays subsistence wages and provides minimal benefits to about 1,000 workers. That the site is only being leased by Amazon from a local construction company suggests that there is little in the way of long-term commitment to the community or the workers.

The closure of the Ford plant in a county with a population in the tens of thousands resulted in a dire loss of tax revenue to the township, county and province of over \$2 million annually for 11 years. Several proposals for the site failed to materialize before the decision by Amazon to establish a facility at the location was finalized.

All levels of government in the region have promoted the new warehouse as a significant contribution to the renewal of economic activity, even though it falls far short of the industrial potential of decades ago. Savage attacks on wages and working conditions, tax cuts for business and austerity for workers have hollowed out the prospects for the working class in Ontario in a race to the bottom in the name of global competitiveness. This process has been overseen by trade union-backed Liberal governments, frequently with support from the New Democrats, as well as the Progressive Conservatives. The union bureaucracies have worked tirelessly to smother working class resistance to the decimation of Ontario's industrial landscape.

In nearby St. Thomas, the massively government-subsidized Volkswagen-owned battery company PowerCo SE will soon begin construction on a plant to produce batteries for electric vehicles. Its backers have similarly promised thousands of well-paid high-tech jobs, but it will almost certainly never live up to the corporate hype.

Amazon has been welcomed with open arms by governments everywhere it goes. But in Ontario, as elsewhere, its disdain for workers has been well documented.

The incidence of workplace injuries at Amazon's warehouses reported by Ontario's Workplace Safety And Insurance Board (WSIB) tripled over a four year period—from 432 injury claims in 2019, to 570 in 2020, 980 in 2021 and 1,330 in 2022. Of those, 22 percent were lower back injuries and 62 percent were sprains and strains. These figures more than lend credence to the description of the relentless pressure to process orders on the warehouse floor. In an industry that promises next-day or even same-day

delivery, workers are pushed increasingly hard to process orders such that safety is neglected to meet production demands.

The amount WSIB ordered Amazon to pay out in connection with those injury claims increased from \$1 million in 2019 to more than \$4 million in 2022. This is of course a small price to pay for driving productivity when measured against the \$30 billion net income for the corporation in 2023.

Added to this is the fact that the WSIB is based on an insurance model in which premiums from employers are calculated according to the number of claims made to the Board. This gives Amazon, and every other employer in the province, incentive to conceal or downplay every workplace incident.

In fact, a report by the *Toronto Star* found that Amazon challenged almost 80 percent of serious injury claims, contending “no proof of accident,” an “unclear mechanism of injury” or a “pre-existing condition.” Additionally, there was a “huge discrepancy” when comparing the number of injuries Amazon reported to US and Canadian officials.

Regardless of how Amazon tries to portray itself as an employer, whether to its own employees, government agencies or the general public, the growing number of injuries and worker deaths at the company's facilities testifies to the harshness of the world's largest online retailer.

Paulo Bezerra's GoFundMe page joins a growing list of Amazon employees that includes Jerrold Dejean, who died at a South Carolina fulfillment centre; Jose Rodriguez, a San Antonio Amazon driver who was attacked by a pit bull; an Amazon driver in Corpus Christi raising money for a prosthetic leg to make his deliveries more bearable; and many more in a list that brings to mind the characters in Dickens' industrial horror stories.



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