

“We’re human beings, not slaves and animals”

UK newspaper exposé details Amazon’s super-exploitation of workforce

By Robert Stevens and John Newham
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An undercover investigation by the *Sunday Mirror* newspaper has exposed brutal working conditions at Amazon’s warehouse in Tilbury, in southern England.

A reporter from the newspaper, Alan Selby, spent five weeks working at the “fulfilment centre”, which opened a few weeks ago and is the biggest warehouse of its kind in Europe. The four-storey plant occupies 2.2 million square feet—the size of 11 football pitches—and employs 1,500 workers.

Selby used a concealed camera to take video footage and photos of exhausted workers slumped at their work stations, while he himself was under constant pressure to increase his workload. He worked 10.5 hour shifts, with just two 30 minute breaks, for £8.20 (US \$10.92) an hour—just a few pence above the £7.50 (US \$9.99) minimum wage.

Selby explained, “Two half-hour breaks were the only time off my feet, but it was barely enough time to race to the canteen and wolf down some food to keep my energy up.”

Describing his workday, Selby wrote, “Alone in a locked metal cage, 10 feet from my nearest colleague, a robot approaches from the shadows and thrusts a tower of shelves towards me. I have nine seconds to grab and process an item to be sent for packing—a target of 300 items an hour, for hour after relentless hour.”

He reports how a computer screen in front of him gave constant reminders of his “units per hour” and exactly how long each has taken. Workers are given impossible targets under threat of being sacked. Breaks are timed and people are so exhausted that they fall asleep. Three of the photos in the exposé show workers slumped at their workstation, with one woman described as being asleep. Exhausted workers are warned about the consequences of even sitting down.

An angry co-worker asked, “Why are we not allowed to sit when it is quiet and not busy? We are human beings, not slaves and animals.”

One of Selby's pictures was of a filthy and unusable staff toilet. The plant is so huge that “walking to the toilet could take more than five minutes—almost a third of a mile from some of my workstations, and even longer when those on my floor were out of order, as they often were...the system would know I had not been active, so the pressure was on to hold it in.”

Selby was moved from the picking to the packing department. But the exploitation was just as extreme. He writes, “I was told to pack 120 single items an hour, or 85 multiple items. And I’ve since been told this will rise to 200 items.”

Workers are regularly fired for not meeting targets. Selby told of scores of staff sacked because of missed performance targets in the lead up to Black Friday.

The constant pressure has dangerous health consequences. “Workers reported ambulances being called to the warehouse on at least 2 occasions when one woman suffered a panic attack after being told she had to work compulsory overtime over Christmas, which would mean her working up to 55 hours a week, and another collapsed on the job, after struggling on despite feeling unwell.”

One worker told him, “Everybody suffers here. I pulled my hamstring but I just had to carry on. My friend spent two days off after she damaged her knee ligaments.”

Another said, “At my induction someone was asking why the staff turnover was so high here. It’s because they’re killing people. All my friends think I’m dead. I’m exhausted.”

Selby recalled “two safety incidents that could have seen somebody seriously hurt” in his final fortnight.

Selby also noted that he was barely able to tolerate Amazon's punishing regime even though he is physically fit. "Weeks before I went in, I had finished a summer running season which included two marathons and a handful of half marathons. Physically I am no slouch--yet my body felt drained every day. My blood pressure and resting heart rate both rose from the stresses of the job."

He reported his body ached with the workload. His fitness tracker showed he walked at least 10 miles most days, with the physical effort leaving him on occasion feeling dizzy.

Despite the low wages, many workers have long, expensive commutes. Workers spend £4 (US \$5.33) a day out of their own wages to get a bus to the plant from a site in London. Some spend four hours a day commuting.

These inhumane conditions are replicated at Amazon's 16 UK fulfilment plants. Last December it was reported that workers at the Amazon plant in Dunfermline, Scotland, were forced to sleep in tents nearby in order to save on transport costs.

The company's exploitation of its workforce is constantly being ramped up. This year Tilbury is due to ship 1.2 million items. In an article prior to Black Friday, the *Daily Mail* reported that workers at Amazon's plant in Peterborough, Cambridgeshire were being expected to dispatch an aggregate of 85 items *every second* for the duration of the sale period.

To achieve its targets, Amazon is recruiting an additional 20,000 temporary workers--on poverty level wages--at its UK operations in the run up to Christmas. These are on top of its regular 24,000-strong workforce. This is the model employed by all the major players in the retail and delivery industry. The Commercialfleet.org website reported, "To help cope with the sheer volume of orders, an extra 49,000 seasonal staff will be hired across Royal Mail, Argos and Amazon bringing the total staff numbers working for all brands to 263,701."

Based on the super-exploitation documented by Selby, Amazon--the UK's largest retailer--made £7.3 billion (US \$9.2 billion) in the UK last year alone. He concludes, "Its army of 24,000 unhappy elves are paid as little as seven pence per item to help pack and deliver each one across the UK. My final shift was two days ago, Black Friday--when millions of Brits logged on to help founder Jeff Bezos earn an extra £1.8 billion overnight."

The *World Socialist Web Site* reported that Bezos recently became the world's richest man with a net worth over £75.11 billion (\$100 billion) due to the exploitation of Amazon's 300,000 strong international workforce, the

undercutting of competitors and monopolising the home delivery market. Workers make as little as £175 (US \$233) per month in Amazon's Indian plants, to an average of just £9.31 (US \$12.40) an hour in the United States.

A final point should be noted about Selby's exposure. He writes that the "Tilbury warehouse is a slick operation, up to speed on health and safety and workplace law. But just because it is legal does not mean it is good for you."

This statement is damning indictment of the present Conservative government and past Labour ones who have eviscerated workplace standards and regulations to a point where such degradation of workers is legal!

This is all with the connivance of the trade unions. Some 2,500 Amazon workers in Germany struck six plants last week to demand better pay. Staff at an Amazon facility near Piacenza in northern Italy also struck on the same day to demand "dignified salaries" and more staff. The strikes were held last Friday to coincide with Black Friday. The role of the unions as appendages of management was summed up by its role in Italy, with the *Daily Mirror* reporting, "The unions advised workers who are on short-term, work-on-demand contracts to stay on the job, so they would not risk losing future gigs."

The *Sunday Mirror* report sheds further light on the conditions reported by the International Amazon Workers Voice (IAWV), which is published by the WSWs and fights to link the struggles of Amazon workers in Europe, the US, Asia and Latin America in a unified fight for workers' rights and socialism.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>