

OSHA dragging its feet investigating death of Pennsylvania Amazon worker Devan Shoemaker

By Douglas Lyons
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The Occupational Health and Safety Administration has not released any findings yet on the death of 28-year-old Devan Shoemaker on September 19 at an Amazon Fulfillment Center in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Shoemaker was killed while he was assisting a truck driver unhook the trailer from a truck. According to the Pennsylvania State Police, Shoemaker was run over by the truck as he attempted to loosen a kingpin between the trailer and the truck. The kingpin, which is under the trailer and attaches to a turn-able hitch at the rear of the truck, had become stuck.

Shoemaker and the truck driver planned to move the truck forward in order to grease the hookup. Shoemaker had to place himself between the back two axles of the truck. When the truck moved, however, Shoemaker was run over. The Pennsylvania State Police have not filed any charges.

OSHA, the federal agency charged with ensuring the health and safety of workers, has said that it will release its findings within six months of the accident. In reality, the agency provides corporations with the legal cover for industrial murder, in most cases finding nothing wrong or issuing only minor fines which the companies consider part of the cost of doing business.

Devan Shoemaker had worked at the Amazon warehouse for seven years. He had started filling customer orders before moving up to the job in the yard, known as a “yard jockey,” where he assisted drivers.

Shoemaker leaves behind his wife of three years, Emily, and their young son. He loved being outdoors—gardening, riding four-wheelers, and working on projects. He loved spending time with his family and was an excellent father.

According to comments on the PennLive.com articles about the death, mistrust in the official narrative resonates. One commenter wrote, “Where is the security

cam footage ... billion dollar company like Amazon is sure to have some.”

Another commenter, who identified himself as a truck driver with over three decades of experience, wrote that the official proclamation from the state police “was completely wrong. Wrong terms etc.” In another post, the truck driver continued, “Why would an Amazon worker help a truck driver hook up to a trailer? I must have hooked up at least 10,000 trailers and never had to have help backing under a trailer. Something is not right here. No reason for someone to get between the truck and the trailer ... OSHA needs to look real close at this ... When the fifth wheel on the tractor engages on the pin on the trailer it locks automatically. No human hands necessary ... It has been my job for 35 years.”

Other commenters took note of the lack of training at Amazon and the practice by Amazon and many shipping companies to allow those without a commercial drivers license (CDL) to drive trucks in the yard.

An Amazon worker wrote: “associates [Amazon truck drivers] only get 30 hours’ worth of training. It is the law that you have to have a CDL license to be behind the wheel of a tractor trailer! This is what happens when you put someone with no experience behind the wheel of a tractor trailer ... Amazon yard jockey program should be shut down ... [with] major lawsuits and fines.”

According to an Amazon job posting, a yard jockey specialist is a non-CDL position. Preferred candidates need at least two years commercial driving experience.

In a perfunctory statement following the death, Amazon wrote, “Safety is our number one priority, and as we do with any incident, we are reviewing our practices and protocols to ensure the well-being of our employees. Any safety incident that occurs within our operations is one too many.”

Since Shoemaker's death, Amazon posted a job opening for a safety specialist at the warehouse, but such positions are used as mere window dressing in their constant push for faster production at all costs. Amazon's entire business model is based on record delivery of its products, and workers at its warehouses face the most advanced form of continual monitoring of almost every step they take.

An additional commenter, a former worker at the Amazon warehouse where Shoemaker was killed, wrote: "I am surprised that this doesn't happen more often. While talking up a good safety program through the other side of their mouth they stress high numbers. In my time there I saw many occasions where staff trying to meet required numbers (under threats of losing their job, if they didn't) led to extremely unsafe conditions resulting in pedestrian versus order picker, order picker vs order picker, and order picker versus racks incidents because of this pressure. Bezos, you can't have both a high production expectation and a high safety expectation in the same time frame. To expect this is a highly dangerous proposition."

An Amazon worker in Pittsburgh told the WSWS, "the company doesn't care about safety. All they care about is us making our quotas. We walk and lift all day, it is wearing on your back and joints. Turnover is so great that the company gets rid of people before they start to have problems.

"Bezos makes billions but the employees are treated like crap. We are the ones who make the company run, they couldn't do it without us. I really feel for Shoemaker's wife and son who will never know his father."

Coworkers lauded his friendly demeanor and hard work.

Rebecca Lynn Keck, quoted in PennLive, said, "He was such a nice guy ... always had a smile on his face, always cared about other people. If you were having a bad day, he would do anything to cheer you up."

Jordy Heishman said, "Devan was a great guy who would stop and help anyone if they needed it. Even if he had to go out of his way."

An online GoFundMe campaign has been organized to raise money for the family. It surpassed its goal of \$3,500, raising \$4,790. Many of Shoemaker's coworkers donated.

The tragic death of Shoemaker, wholly preventable, is not the only death at this Amazon facility. In 2014, Jody Rhoads, 52, died of multiple traumatic injuries after her

pallet truck smashed into shelves.

The Occupational Health and Safety Administration's (OSHA) incident investigation found no culpability relating to Amazon's oppressive working conditions and lack of training or any temp agencies through which Amazon contracts for employment. Not so much as a single violation was found.

An unnamed commenter wrote in a 2014 PennLive article on Rhoads' death that "OSHA is strictly a reactive enforcement agency. There are little or no safety audits conducted unless an accident has been reported. Their form of enforcing Safety regulations is assessing outrageous and unwarrantable civil penalties. They promote closing the barn door after the horse runs away! Why does a Federal Agency need a body or victim to enforce Federal Safety Regulations?"

This particular Amazon facility has 600 full-time permanent workers. During busy seasons, Amazon hires additional seasonal workers, bringing the total to over 1,000. Amazon typically fills positions through temp agencies, in this case SMX Staffing. In 2014, for example, SMX hired 16,000 workers for a nine-week stretch. Workers usually work four 10-hour shifts per week with starting pay a paltry \$13 per hour.

Operating 24 hours, 7 days a week, this facility, built in 2010, is the seventh generation of Amazon warehouses and is over 800,000 square feet. To increase profit margins, Amazon installed vertical shelving, doubling the amount of items it can stockpile while creating dangerous conditions for workers. With more than 1 million items stored, workers have to use powered industrial trucks (PIT) to pick items for shipment.

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