

“It is like being tortured in your mind and your body for 10 hours a night”

Injured Amazon worker describes high-tech dystopia inside Texas warehouse

By Tom Carter
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Injured Amazon worker Shannon Allen spoke to the *International Amazon Workers Voice* about the conditions at the DFW-7 fulfillment center in Haslet, Texas. Shannon described brutal working conditions, authoritarian-style surveillance of workers, and management demands to maintain frenetic rates of speed.

Shannon, 49, lives in Azle, Texas, a small town on the western outskirts of Fort Worth. She was injured while working at Amazon, returned to the job, and was injured again at the same workstation. Physically unable to continue work, Shannon now faces homelessness on top of her injuries, but she is determined to “fight or die.”

“I’m going to pack up my car and take a picture of it to send around,” Shannon said. “That way people know what you get from working at Amazon.” Unable to pay for food and rent, Shannon has dropped two pant sizes and eats only every other day. “It’s not that I made poor money choices,” she added. “I didn’t have any money to make a choice.”

Shannon was born in Tyler, Texas, and spent some time living in Oklahoma. Before working at Amazon, she worked at a day care facility for \$8 per hour. She likes heavy metal and tattoos. She raised two sons, now 22 and 24, who live in Arkansas and North Carolina.

The base pay at Amazon is \$12 per hour, which amounts to less than \$25,000 per year. (In her first year at Amazon, Shannon says she was actually paid around \$13,000, which is under the federal poverty line.) At the orientation meeting, the company promised an extra 50 cents per hour on weekends and an extra dollar for overnight work, rates which were written on a white board at the front of the gathering.

To maximize her income, Shannon volunteered for the overnight shift on Saturday through Thursday. The shift begins at 6:30 at night and ends at 5:00 in the morning. However, once Shannon received her first paycheck, she realized that her pay was \$13 per hour for the weekend shifts, not the \$13.50 that had been promised.

Shannon began working at Amazon in May 2017. At first, she confessed, she thought it was exciting, new, and different. “There was this sense that I made the world go ‘round,” she said. She was working in one of the world’s largest and most high-tech companies, distributing huge quantities of goods to vast numbers of people.

An Amazon “fulfillment center” contains tens of millions of products, sorted into bins that are arranged on “pods.” The pods, each 7- to 8-foot tall, have 25 to 30 bins on each side. The bins and pods are stocked with products coming into the warehouse by “stowers.” When a customer places an order online, a robot brings the pod where the product is stored to a “picker,” who immediately receives instructions to take a certain product out of a certain bin and sends it down the line.

“Everything is done by computers and robots,” Shannon explained. She

described the “Kiva robots,” manufactured by Amazon Robotics (formerly Kiva Systems) as “like a Roomba, except they are large. Some of them are as large as a car hood. They bring pods to the workers. It is awesome the way the robots come to you. I had never seen anything like that before.”

Shannon worked as a “counter,” whose job was to check the work of the pickers and stowers. Fail to catch a mistake, and become a target of a punitive system of “quality errors” and “write-ups.”

Not long after starting to work at Amazon, Shannon began to recognize what she called the “dirty secrets.” “These are the things they don’t tell you about when you’re hired.”

Every time workers leave the facility, they are subjected to an invasive search. “You wait in line with a bucket like at the airport,” she said. A worker is required to take off belt, shoes, and hat. Bags are sent through a conveyor belt and the worker goes through a full body scan. “If you set it off, you have to go through a second search, and they wand you front to back.”

In a 10-hour shift, workers are permitted two 15-minute breaks and one 30-minute break for lunch. To go outside on a break, workers must submit to the search and go through the security line. “The lines to get outside on your 15-minute break are 20 to 30 deep on each line, and there are only two lines.” Meanwhile, the breaks are timed from “scan to scan” at a worker’s station, and workers are admonished, “Not one second more.”

The DFW-7 fulfillment center is divided into “A” and “B” modules, called “A-mod” and “B-mod.” Each module has four floors consisting of 50 to 75 workstations each. Each worker’s station features a camera pointed at them from behind, as well as cameras facing them from the area containing the pods. “They are getting a rear view and a front view,” Shannon said.

The workers carry a handheld scanner with a screen on it that instructs them what to do at any given moment. In Shannon’s case, as a “counter,” it told her what bins to count. Workers are timed on every task, down to the smallest increments, “from the time you clock in to the time you clock out.”

Workers are not allowed to eat or drink anything other than water at their stations. Upon being hired, they are given an Amazon water bottle. “You cannot talk to your neighbor, to help the time go by. You can’t bring in a cellphone. You cannot bring any type of electronics. No headphones.”

“The heat is sweltering.” Shannon described fans here and there, pointing down the aisles where workers walk to get to their stations, but not toward the workers to help them cool off. “Whoever thought of that design was a complete idiot,” Shannon said. “Because we get no relief

from the heat with them pointed down the aisle.”

Temperatures reached 80, 85, and 90 degrees Fahrenheit. “In the summertime, it gets over 100 degrees in there,” Shannon said. “Here is another genius idea. They have these signs hanging down that have our station numbers on them. These signs are probably as big as a 19-inch TV. They are in front of the fans and it blows the sign constantly. And we get no relief from the heat.”

“July and August are the absolute worst,” Shannon continued. “It was nothing to see an ambulance up at Amazon four to five times a night.” Workers dropped at their stations, physically unable to continue working. “On my shift,” Shannon said, “We were picking people up from heat exhaustion.”

The image of ambulances waiting outside to pick up workers who collapsed was a common sight. “Every time we would go on break, ambulances would be waiting outside to pick people up. But not one manager, nobody from HR, nobody from security is out there escorting people to the ambulances. They just don’t care. You are on your own.”

Shannon told the story of how she took a co-worker to the emergency room because her blood pressure skyrocketed. “The doctor said if she had not come in, she would not have made it,” Shannon said. “That was caused from Amazon. You have to keep rate, move as fast as you possibly can, without making quality errors. It is like running in place.”

“It is like being tortured in your mind and your body for 10 hours a night,” Shannon said. “Up and down the ladder, on our knees, stoop down, jump back up, get on the ladder.” Workers would eventually “reach their wits’ end” and “despair.” Of the workers she was hired with, Shannon said that most of them were no longer working at Amazon.

Responding to a recent report that ranked Amazon as among America’s most dangerous workplaces, Shannon explained that many people do not understand what the Amazon warehouses are like on the inside. “People see this cool, hip company.”

“It is like doing 10 hours of cardio, five days a week,” she said. The demands for unrealistic speeds of work mean that a worker does not even have time to drink water or use the restroom. “I have so many seconds to count everything in my bin. If there are 150 gift cards in my bin, I have so many seconds to count them and send them on. If my machine beeps at me, I have to count them again.”

“When I first started working there, the rate for a counter was 519 per hour. In January 2018, it was raised to 550. In March, it was raised to 600 counts per hour.” This means that there is a count every 6 seconds. “It is repetitive,” Shannon said. “It felt like I was having a heart attack because I was so anxious about making rate.”

In addition to having “expectations of the human body that are unrealistic,” Shannon said, the company expected workers to manage with faulty equipment and constant demands to meet strict time limits. Attempting to work at high speeds around faulty equipment was a common cause of injury. “The stations themselves are not safe for the people to do their job,” Shannon said. Workers also slipped on the stairs.

Female workers were required to keep their hair in a ponytail, and Shannon described being terrified of bending forward around the robot-controlled pods. “If the pod is released, which has been known to happen, it could grab my pony tail and take off with me.”

“Amazon is all about work, work, work, work, work,” Shannon said. Workers were harassed over small increments of “time off task,” or “TOT time.” If a manager came to ask Shannon a question about something for nine minutes, she would later be reproached by another manager for exactly nine minutes of “TOT time.” To defend themselves from this regime, Shannon described how workers brought in notebooks and started taking careful notes of how they spent their time. Sometimes, for example, the pods would not arrive back-to-back (a “pod-gap”), which is not the worker’s fault.

Shannon recalls one episode where a manager approached her and

demanded to see her notebook. Shannon replied: “These are my own private personal notes. You have no right to come demanding my notebook.” The manager responded by threatening her with termination if she did not turn it over. Shannon was only able to keep her job by complaining to human resources.

Shannon remembers glimpsing a clipboard once with the number 821 on it. This was the number of people who had been fired from January to May of 2017: “They brag about the number of people that they fire.”

Shannon’s first injury took place on October 24, 2017, at 10:30 at night, or around five months after starting at Amazon. “I was counting, counting, counting,” she said. “I was not happy with the station. It did not have a brush-guard to separate me from the pod. A brush-guard looks like a bristle-brush on each side. It stops things from falling onto the Kiva floor.” The Kiva floor, where the robots operate, is an area workers are prohibited from entering.

“I had to take one of those big yellow totes and put it in-between my legs to prevent things from falling. I was half on the station, half over the Kiva floor. You get written up if you don’t keep things from falling. I was counting at eye-level.” With the tote between her legs, she had to lean further forward to reach the pod while keeping her head facing forward. While in that position, she suddenly felt a sharp pain in her back.

“It felt like someone stabbed me in the back and dragged it all the way down my spine,” Shannon said. “I sat up. I sat there for a couple of minutes and pain was so intense I thought I was going to pass out.”

Even though she was in terrible pain, she thought, “I have to get this done or they are going to come see what I’m doing.” So, she tried to start counting again, but could not continue. “I felt like my back was on fire.” She told a manager, “My back is killing me.”

“Hold a minute,” the manager said, before calling over another manager. That manager walked her to an elevator and then made her walk to the other side of the warehouse, where Amazon maintains a “triage area.” On this long walk, Shannon described the pain as unbearable. “This facility is 23 acres, so you know.” At the triage area, there were no doctors or nurses, just EMTs.

Shannon was told to lie down on a heating pad for 30 minutes, after she was discharged without pay, which the company called “Voluntary Time Off” or “VTO.” Rather than send her to a doctor, Amazon set up a “treatment plan” consisting of having Shannon sit on a heating pad for 15-20 minutes per night.

“I tried to come back the next night and work,” Shannon said. “I still kept coming to work and trying to work. It got to the point where I could not work past 10:30,” or the first four hours of her shift. When she could not finish her shift, the company sent her home without pay.

“It was hurting so bad, I could hardly walk out to the car when I left. This went on for weeks. They never once mentioned workers’ compensation or help from an outside doctor. I only learned about workers’ comp from friends and family. Amazon tried to keep me working with the treatment [i.e., the heating pad].”

Shannon did not want to use her paid vacation time, in hopes that she could use it to do something fun in the future. “I live a very simple life,” she said. “I don’t have any of the extras that a lot of people have. I do not have cable or a home phone or Internet. I just have Internet on my phone.” A few days of paid vacation were something she looked forward to. Amazon workers get around 1.5 to 3 hours of paid vacation time each pay period, which is every two weeks, in addition to a maximum of 48 hours of paid time-off per year.

Matters came to a head after about two to three weeks, when a manager rudely told Shannon: “We are not giving VTO anymore. You need to get back to work.” This led to a confrontation in which Shannon risked retaliation by finally demanding to be given workers’ compensation paperwork.

“I’ve never been on workers’ compensation,” Shannon said. “I was a

blind mouse going through workers' comp. I didn't know who to call or if anyone was going to call me. I just tried to do everything that they asked me to."

"Once you get injured you are not dealing with Amazon," she explained. "You are referred to a 'Leave of Absence Team.' It took them about a week before they called me to approve my short-term disability leave."

Amazon paid Shannon \$25 a week for her short-term disability, while Sedgwick, the company's workers' compensation insurer, paid her \$211 a week. "I butted heads with the adjuster," Shannon said. "I was not happy with the way things were progressing. Nobody was taking me seriously about my injury. My injury was being minimized. It was not being acknowledged."

Even though she was physically unable to work, she continued to receive threatening e-mails from Amazon, which stated that she was "no call, no show" and accruing "negative UPT [unpaid time off] time." Meanwhile, in the workers' compensation system, Shannon explained, "the doctors tell you to get back to work." The doctors did not conduct an MRI or an x-ray. "They poked my back once."

"You don't get the same doctor each time," Shannon explained. "It's a new doctor each time, and you have to tell the story all over again. They tried to push narcotics on me. I said I don't want your narcotics. I want to get better."

"My back was perfectly fine before I started working for Amazon. The only reason I filled the prescriptions was so that they did not say I was failing to follow instructions. I'm not a pill person. I do not do drugs. I did not want to become dependent on them. I wanted my back to be fixed. I stressed that from the very get-go."

"I felt as though Amazon did not care about me being injured," Shannon said. "There are 50 people in line waiting for my job. They use you up and then bring in the next person. Someone was doing my job while I was on leave. Someone had my job before me."

Between rent, groceries, her phone bill, and traveling to doctors' appointments, Shannon's meager disability income slipped through her fingers. She fell behind on rent in her RV park around January, and the landlord began threatening to evict her.

Shannon returned to work on January 27, a day before her birthday. "The insurance adjuster and Amazon's workers' comp manager decided that it was taking too long to get my therapy sessions 29 miles across town," Shannon said. Through the workers' compensation system, she was prescribed six sessions of physical therapy.

The therapy sessions were an hour's car drive away. The therapy itself consisted of doing two different stretches for 15 minutes. "By the time I drove there and back, my back was in more pain—not to mention the cost of gas." She was only able to complete three sessions before she was ordered back to work.

The company cited an "excessive amount of time to complete therapy" and cancelled Shannon's workers' compensation. On the day she returned to work, Shannon was injured a second time: "I worked an hour and 45 minutes before I was injured again on the same station." This time, Amazon's triage center turned her away. She was put back on leave.

After deductions and withholding, Amazon's paycheck of \$24 every week only amounted to only \$34 every two weeks. Rather than continue going to the therapist chosen by Amazon's insurance company, Shannon sought out her own treatment, finding a young physical therapist in Azle who took her into her care: "I love her to pieces. I felt great. This girl knew her job and she had compassion. She was a very compassionate girl."

After seven more therapy sessions, Shannon returned to work again in March, but was only able to work for a couple of hours a night. "I could not stand up straight. It is the same repetitive motion. It was killing my back. The injury was still there. It got eased up in therapy, but then it got

aggravated again. It feels like someone stuck a knife in my back and just left it."

"I worked for almost a month at two hours a night. It was eating me up in money for gas. I was not making anything. I was off workers' comp. When I was working eight hours a week, you can see why I was falling behind on rent. My paycheck would come in and it would be \$105. I would give \$50 to my landlord and keep the rest. I was going to work hungry."

Shannon stopped going to work in April. "I just told them I couldn't do it." What followed was a frustrating series of doctors' visits. The first set of doctors told her she should limit stooping or bending, but then changed their opinion and cleared her to go back to work. Amazon's efforts to "accommodate" her involved offering to reassign her to work unloading trucks, lifting pallets, moving pallets, and moving totes around.

At a meeting in April, Amazon's workers' compensation manager told Shannon that the company's "safety senior ops" manager had determined that she did not need any accommodations for her job. "I didn't realize he went to doctor school," was Shannon's response. In a subsequent meeting, Shannon was close to losing her temper: "I hate this place. I feel like I'm working in a prison camp. Do you know what it's like to work for 10 hours a night and not be able to talk to anyone?"

Shannon pawned her gun, one of her few possessions of value, to stay alive. "I could not go another day without food," she said. "I was finally able to buy some food and have a little bit of money left over."

She went to another doctor to get a second opinion. This doctor said that he did not understand why she was being released to go back to work. He said that she was seriously injured, ordered her to take off work for a month, and indicated that she may need surgery. However, this diagnosis was overturned by a "peer review group," which determined that Shannon's injuries were caused by "old age" and not by working at Amazon.

"This is really what it's like," Shannon said. "I have not embellished anything. They really don't care about anything but profit."

"I looked up all of Jeff Bezos's houses. It burned me up. While he is living high on the hog, in my house I have one light on at night. He has every light on. While he's comfortable with his millions and millions and billions, we are sweating like dogs in his warehouses. I call bullshit. There are people living in the parking lot at DFW-7. I have seen that myself. They go in to wash up in the bathroom. They eat at Amazon. They have refrigerated food that you can buy at way-above normal prices."

"I want people who are in the same position to know that they are not alone," Shannon said. "This is happening everywhere, all over the world. I am just one of hundreds of thousands of people who feel the exact same way, and they are too scared to speak up."

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