

“I would not wish working for Amazon on my worst enemy”

Southern California Amazon worker reports company forcing employees to work despite fire evacuation orders

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The *International Amazon Workers Voice* recently sat down with Camille about her experiences working for Amazon over the last two years. She came into contact with the *World Socialist Web Site* at the urging of Shannon Allen, an Amazon worker who reached out to the WSWS to cover her story of injury and subsequent homelessness at the Haslet, Texas facility.

Camille is a young woman in her 20s who lives in Southern California and has been working at the ONT6 Fulfillment Center in Riverside County since 2016. Camille described a situation similar to the Haslet facility, including low wages, difficult working conditions and authoritarian management practices.

Currently tens of thousands of homes in Riverside County are at risk of being engulfed by the Holy fire, which has burned over 10,000 acres since Monday and is only 5 percent contained, with authorities reporting no end in sight.

Camille said the fire has created even more dire working conditions and particularly for those under evacuation orders. “The air quality is horrible at the facility. The fire is so close they are closing schools, yet Amazon is still forcing people to come to work. Some of my coworkers have homes that are in danger of being lost, yet they aren’t letting them take leave.”

The company’s disregard for workers during this emergency situation is part of a larger pattern Camille outlined to IAWV reporters.

“It’s really hot in there. The management have scanners that gauge the temperature in the morning, and then set the air conditioning on at an uncomfortable 80 degrees. Can you imagine walking all day for 10 hours in an 80 degree room? They have it running at 80 degrees and it’s supposedly conditioning the air. That is what they say!

“You walk in the building and you feel like you just want to go home. During the last heat wave, the temperatures would reach up to 118 degrees inside the facility. The senior operations official said that if it was going to get any hotter they would have had to shut the whole place down. But how much hotter does it have to be? Does someone have to pass out or die?” The Haslet facility, where Shannon Allen worked, often had a heat index of 80, 90 and even 100 degrees.

Coupled with the stifling heat, Camille works 10-hour days and often has to take on the work intended for two individuals. “People are constantly quitting and Amazon does not want to open up transfers. We are losing people every month and it is essentially

double the work for all of us.” Working at Amazon demands an unsustainable level of physical activity. “I walk sometimes about 12 miles a day. But I really feel bad for all the pick workers. They can walk up to 20 miles a day and sometimes more.”

Camille added, “We can’t have our phones on us, but a lot of pick workers track their numbers with a Fitbit or Apple watch.” She remarked, “Pick work has 10-hour work days and at six days a week. Imagine walking 120 miles and 60 hours per week? Then you get one day off to recuperate and you have to do it all over again!”

Due to low pay at Amazon, Camille was forced to move back in with her parents. She explained that most people she knows at her facility begin at \$11.75 an hour and receive a 25 cent raise every six months. “I am grateful for having the option to go back living with my parents. I know some people in there that aren’t making it. They have two, three, four kids, so many don’t even have the option to quit.”

Even the low-level management responsible for pushing workers to the brink are overworked and underpaid. “Our area managers used to make 55,000 a year, but now Amazon is hiring them at 45,000, and with reduced incentives such as stocks and benefits. Managers are on salary and on peak season work from 5 a.m. all the way until 8 p.m. at night. Sometimes they work 14- 15-hour days,” Camille said.

When IAWV reporters explained that the casualization of labor and the driving down of wages were the policy of bringing “jobs back to America,” Camille agreed, adding, “It has gotten worse over the years. But Amazon doesn’t care. They don’t care if you quit. They don’t care if you get injured. Whatever happens, Amazon is going to replace you.”

Like most seasonal workers in other industries, many Amazon employees receive no benefits, including pension and healthcare. Camille explained that Amazon categorizes its warehouse employees by badge color, distinguishing between a seasonal and a regular full-time worker.

“One of the main issues in understaffing is that they aren’t converting enough *white badges* (seasonal workers) into *blue badges* (full-time employees). There are still people in the building I work at that have been here since peak season, so about eight months, and have yet to be converted into a blue badge. We just had one of our last seasonal workers quit after eight months. She said she wasn’t going to put up with it anymore.”

This division also affects the issue of the stock benefits promised by the company to newly hired white badge workers after two years of employment.

The reality for the majority of Amazon workers, however, is either termination, injury or resignation prior to reaching their two years with the company. Many workers believe Amazon management commonly fires workers arbitrarily as they approach the date by which the stocks are to be issued.

Camille said, "We have no job security. I have seen on many occasions people who were really close to their two-year mark and get fired for just about any reason. I have seen people fired one week, and even a few days before receiving their stocks. My friend was fired two months ago for drawing two arrows on a whiteboard board and they marked her for vandalism. Security called her in and told her she was going to get fired. They then retracted their initial charges, since they were so absurd, and instead claimed she had gone negative on her hours. It went from vandalism charges to running out of hours."

Camille continued, "I have heard of many stories from my coworkers about people getting fired for what they were posting on Facebook. Our supervisors warn us all the time that we could be terminated for what we post online, but it happens more than you think. Just go read 'The Face of Amazon.' It is a website started by a guy who was fired for trying to form a union. The management ended up firing him for something completely unrelated."

Time-off task (TOT) is generated by management when their employees take time to go to the restroom when off break, or when employees are working behind schedule. Given the large facilities and warehouses, going through security clearance, taking a bathroom break, the TOT can add up and management uses these figures as an easy means to justify firing workers.

"We have to worry about TOT because the managers can easily pull that up in their computers. If you go over 30 minutes TOT, then you get written up. After you receive another writeup, you are gone. It's very easy to acquire TOT as a pick worker to stop and take a drink or even have management come talk to you. Ninety-nine percent of the people in pick want to transfer out," Camille said.

The stress and frantic pace affect all workers to varying degrees. Camille stated, "I go home with a sore back every day. Just standing on my feet for that long causes my back to hurt. My feet hurt too. When I first started working there, I literally could not walk out of the building because my feet were so sore." She said, "It took me three to four months to adjust."

"I have not gotten injured thankfully. But a lot of people I know have quit because they can't physically take it. A lot of people on the floor don't even report their injuries." She also mentioned that many coworkers withhold their injuries in order to avoid dealing with management. Others aren't so lucky.

"People get injured all the time. I had a friend who I came in with when I started working and she got hurt in March and hasn't been back since. She now has permanent and partial disability in her left wrist. She can't work in a warehouse ever again." Camille reported that for the lifetime injury sustained on her friend's wrist, Amazon settled with the employee with a dismal sum of \$15,000, with her waiving all rights to discuss her injury with the press. Amazon management offered Shannon Allen a measly \$3,500 to essentially shut her up, roughly the same dollar amount Jeff Bezos makes every second as CEO of the company.

Camille also spoke about the inability of Amazon workers to afford the cost of living and the worsening economic conditions facing

young people. "It is hard to be a single person to pay all those bills with what Amazon pays you. Most of my coworkers are in their early 20s, but I have some that are 65 years old. Most of the older folks are having to come back to Amazon because their retirement money has run out. Some of these people are former lawyers and real estate agents.

"I have a friend who got a master's degree and can't find a job. She ended up taking up hours at a bar to help make ends meet. People are now going to school to get a degree but hardly ever find work in their field. Why waste your time and money for college when you know you can't find work?"

Responding to the vast degree of social inequality in the US compared to Bezos, she responded, "I think anybody would agree that Amazon makes their money cutting corners, not addressing the safety of their warehouses, not putting in air conditioning, and working people mercilessly. He has people coming in to measure the temperature inside the facilities so he knows what the conditions are like."

On the way forward for Amazon, UPS and other logistical workers, Camille said, "They need to treat the workers better. We need a raise; not so many working hours. We all have to come together and make a stand. I don't think it's right that they are trying to give Shannon \$3,500 for her back injury. It's a slap in the face."

Shannon Allen's and Camille's stories speak to the conditions of Amazon facilities in the United States and internationally. We urge logistics workers of all industries, including UPS and Amazon workers, to contact the the International Amazon's Workers Voice to express their grievances and address the issues they currently face.

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