

Life under capitalism for an American youth

Injured Texas Wal-Mart worker describes how and why she switched to socialism

By Eric London
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Ashley is one of the roughly 40 million young Americans between the ages of 14 and 29 who are employed in the US, comprising over a quarter of the total employed labor force. Though she was just 20 years old when injured on the job at a Texas Wal-Mart last year, Ashley's body, her credit score, and her aspirations for the future have all suffered as a result.

Ashley's story epitomizes how it has become practically impossible for young people to live healthy and fulfilling lives under capitalism. At the same time, Ashley represents a new wave of workers who are not content with their oppression and are drawing broader political conclusions. She considers herself a revolutionary socialist and blames the capitalist system for her treatment.

"I work in electronics and we're supposed to have three people on staff at all times but I was the only one working there at the time," said Ashley, who did not want to use her real name. "A customer wanted me to bring a TV for them, but all the carts were in use. I called for help on the intercom but no one came, so I did what I thought was best and I picked the TV up myself. I'm pretty light, and I heard a popping in my stomach which made me scared."

Ashley knew she had to go to the emergency room but couldn't afford to pay the several thousand dollars cost. "I asked a manager if they could drive me to the ER," she said. "They told me I could leave and I ended up going across the street to an urgent care center, where I had a three-hour wait. The doctor didn't run any tests, did a stomach pump, and charged me \$2,000."

She says Wal-Mart made her go to a corporate-approved doctor, who "told me it was a hernia and that I shouldn't really do anything about it. I knew that was bull because I've read about the long-term impact of hernias, including that you maybe can't get pregnant. Their doctors told me to only come back if it started bruising or bleeding. Wal-Mart only offered to take me off the work schedule for two weeks, not to give me any paid time off."

"One day, I heard this awful popping noise in my bellybutton, it was my worst nightmare. And it was spewing blood. So I go into shock instantly and trying to figure out what

is going on. It was bleeding out chunks. We went to the ER and the ER told me it was not a hernia, that I had been misdiagnosed and it was a cyst above my belly button. I ended up with \$8,000 medical bills."

Ashley explained, "Wal-Mart was very hesitant to pay anything and they sent me documentation proving that they paid all the bills, but it turns out that a collection agency has been trying to call me about it for six months because there was one bill that Wal-Mart apparently never paid. It has been an absolute nightmare. You'd think the company would make sure that I'd get help from now on, but they still don't do anything for me. They still don't send anyone to help me."

Ashley's experience is far from unique—both among Wal-Mart employees and workers more broadly. Since 2000 alone, Wal-Mart has been forced to pay \$1.5 billion in penalties for violations related to pay, discrimination and workplace safety.

Conditions for young people have deteriorated significantly over the last 30 years. According to a report from the non-profit Young Invincibles, the income of 25- to-34-year-olds—a bracket that is slightly older than Ashley's age group—has declined by 20 percent from 1989 to today. Young people today own half as much wealth as the Baby Boomer generation.

Workers like Ashley find that their ability to enjoy their young adulthood is hampered by financial strain. In Ashley's case, she is forced to live with her parents because she cannot afford to find her own apartment. Because Wal-Mart may have not paid one of Ashley's medical bills, her credit score has been hit.

"Now my credit score is 100 points lower than last year, so I tried to get a car lease and that made my car payments way higher. My loan rate is 6 percent on a lease. I haven't attempted to look for apartments because of my credit and I still live with my parents.

"I've asked Wal-Mart whether they paid the bill and they just tell me the case was closed. The collection agency says they've asked for a check to see if the urgent care center was paid and they're saying it was unpaid. So, either the doctor's office messed up or Wal-Mart. Either way, nobody has helped

me figure out what's wrong and I am getting penalized as a result."

Ashley works two other jobs in addition to working at Wal-Mart, where she earns \$11.80 an hour. "If I wasn't living with my parents, I would be screwed," she said. "I have three jobs currently. I write Facebook ads for other companies through an app on my cell phone. These apps are temp agencies for online work. Those jobs pay \$10 an hour, so I work 38 hours per week at three different jobs, and on top of that I am in school."

Though Ashley loves her parents, she is not satisfied with living at home. "I want to feel like an adult. I have work constantly treating me like I'm 16 and I don't want to feel like that at home. I don't have a curfew, but I feel the need to come home early so I don't wake anyone up. I want freedom. I'm not getting that entirely at my parents' house because I have to drive an hour and a half to school twice a week and I'd rather live near the school but I can't do that because it's incredibly expensive. It's ridiculous that we act like there isn't enough housing. What about all of the foreclosed homes?"

She feels that getting an education will provide her with an opportunity to secure a more fulfilling job and a secure life. She wants to work in game design and just transferred to a larger public university that is an hour-and-a-half from her home. But to do so, she has had to take out loans:

"I've taken out \$12,000 in loans. I will probably have to double that to \$25,000. It isn't as bad as most people. It's obscene that this is the way the United States works. I don't know how we haven't revolted yet honestly."

Ashley feels that she has something to contribute to her area of study. She is dissatisfied with the current state of the gaming industry, which she explains is dominated by a handful of corporations who make games that glorify imperialist war.

"In terms of video games, it seems like there are more and more games that are just money-making tools and none of them have cultural content," she said. "It's the same way for every other part of life. It feels like companies are just feeling more confident screwing people over. It is the same with Internet companies. I live in an area where I can only get 5 megabytes per second and we pay \$80 a month."

Ashley has been a regular reader of the *World Socialist Web Site* for some time. She is a supporter of the Socialist Equality Party's campaign against Internet censorship and spoke at length about how she became a socialist.

"I have read about censorship of WSWS and other sites. It sounds insane to me that the Internet is even something that should be censored. I just can't believe companies have that power. They aren't king of the Internet. They don't get to censor everything they want because it doesn't meet what they want. The Internet should be free to use. You should be able to post what you want and read what you want. How else will people get information about socialism and about revolution if you can't even see it online? It's unfair that they're censoring

those beliefs just because they don't want that."

Ashley explained that though she comes from a conservative family, she became a socialist in ninth grade.

"I like to say 'capitalism: more like crapitalism.' That's my feeling. My parents are Republicans and would talk to me about trickledown economics. I have to pretend not to barf. They don't understand that rich people are holding on to their money that is just sitting there and we have young people who are drowning in student loan debt. We need that wealth but we don't get to touch it. The rich are literally stockpiling money in banks and we have tens of thousands in student loans. I can't fathom it."

She also hates the fact that she has grown up in a period of permanent war:

"I've always been super anti-war. My grandfather was a war veteran and I always protested the glorification of war because he got leukemia from Agent Orange in Vietnam. I was especially angry about that because the government did nothing to help my grandmother. They won't help her and it was entirely the government's fault that he got leukemia. They didn't care. They wanted to hurt people. I had to watch him lose all his mobility over a substance that the government decided to use to hurt people. That was one of the big moments when I switched to socialism."

Ashley described how she and her coworkers debate what constitutes "real" socialism. She disagrees with those who claim Sanders is a socialist: "Even Democrats, they're so ... ugh. I hate watching the Democrats like Sanders on Twitter praising John McCain after he died."

"I thought, 'There is no reason to mourn this man's death.' And when people say they wish Obama was back, I don't wish Obama was back in office because he was doing the same things as Trump, deporting children, sending out drone strikes, killing civilians ... I'm sick and tired of praising people when they deserve to be criticized."

Ashley believes it is essential for workers of all ages to take up these political questions and relate them to their own experiences at work. "I'd like for young people to start speaking out about our treatment. It's not going to change if we don't talk about it."

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>