

“I’ve been wanting to speak up for a long time. I have nothing to lose”

Another homeless grandmother details nightmarish aftermath of Amazon workplace injury

By Eric London
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An initial trickle of reports by Amazon workers of injuries and resulting hardship is turning into a deluge.

When Tammy Edgar saw Amazon worker Shannon Allen speak on an online video about becoming homeless after getting injured at Amazon, she broke down in tears.

“I thought I was alone until I saw her story. It also happened to me. I’ve been wanting to speak up for a long time. I have nothing to lose.”

Tammy lives in the Waco, Texas area and started working at an Amazon fulfillment center in San Marcos in September 2016.

Like most workers, she never thought she would become homeless. But when a loose machine flew off a table at her workstation toward her head one day in December 2016, everything changed. She fell over backward and took a breath. Something was not right. She noticed the pain in her back, her neck, and the left side of her body, including her shoulder, her wrist, and her arm.

She was glad she was alive, but in that moment, she had no idea her injury would change her life. She says Amazon denied her requests for help and ignored witnesses who were available to testify about her injury.

A few months later, she says, she was living in her car at a campsite after staying with various family members in different places. When a stranger on a camping trip heard her story, he gave her cash for a motel room. She broke down crying. “I was grateful but it was humiliating. I was miserable. How was this happening to me? How did I even get here?”

Tammy’s story shows the impact of decades of attacks on the living standards of the working class.

Her father painted airplanes for a living in Kansas and her mother was a registered nurse. Like all working class families in the post-World War Two period, the family went through periods of hardship and worked hard for what they had, but she never dreamed that she could become homeless.

She grew up in Oklahoma, a state that only a generation or two before she was born was devastated by the deathly combination of the Great Depression and drought. Hundreds of thousands of workers and poor farmers fled to the west in search of a better life. Her family stayed.

Tammy has worked all her life. “We just always worked. That’s how I grew up.” As a young woman, she wanted to take care of people and got a job as a home health caregiver. After thirty years caring for seniors on and off, she wanted a change of pace. Amazon was hiring. She was making \$10.50 an hour, slightly better than at her home care job.

She describes the inside of her massive fulfillment center.

“I started out packing orders, then I got moved downstairs on the bottom floor in shipping. We had to load the tractor trailers by hand up from the floor to the ceiling. The boxes could be 50 pounds, sometimes a little more. Then I went back up to packing.”

Tammy was often told the company made sure maintenance fixed broken machines to prevent worker injury. As a packer, one of the machines at her workstation was a wrapping machine with a roll of plastic bubble wrap material that she would use to pack items coming down the line.

One day, she noticed a piece of debris or trash on the ground left by a previous shift. The company failed to keep the floors clean. Tammy thought, “I need to pick this plastic tube on the floor up because I’ll slip and fall.”

Tammy describes what she says happened next:

“As I was bending back from picking the tube up, my right shoulder barely bumped this basket attached to this three-foot table. The machine was not bolted down on the table even though it is supposed to be.

“This machine, with a full row of plastic wrap that hasn’t been aired-up, comes flying off the table toward my head. So I swung my left arm around immediately. It happened so fast. I pushed the machine with the palm of my hand away from my face with this full row of plastic. My body bounced back toward my work station. I was like, ‘what just happened?’”

A team leader and a co-worker ran over to make sure she was alright. They knew it had been a close call. The team leader went and got her manager who brought her to Amcare—a special triage unit set up by Amazon. Amcare’s purpose is to take workers’ statements without an attorney present to be used against them in workers comp proceedings. Tammy didn’t know that about Amcare at the time. She does now.

The Amcare employee wasn’t paying much attention to Tammy and was gossiping about an ex-boyfriend, Tammy says. She was in tremendous pain and they gave her a pack of ice. Despite the pain, she wrote a handwritten report of what took place as Amazon requested. She specifically wrote down the names of the two witnesses that saw her injury. They told her they would vouch for her and she knew she could rely on them.

Now, Tammy says, “Amazon claims those documents are nowhere to be found. They would not allow me to have any copies of my handwritten documents even though I asked. I even went to HR [human resources] and

asked for copies but the HR guy said, 'we already filed those and they are already put away.'" To date, Tammy says she still has not been granted access to her own handwritten report with the names of the two witnesses.

Tammy reports: "When I eventually got copies of Amcare's report on my injury from the workers' compensation doctor, I was stunned by the lies. Amazon said there were no witnesses and that my injury happened on a 40-hour workweek. Those were lies. I put those witnesses down and it happened on a 60-hour workweek and I was on my sixth day of working."

She kept working after her injury for fear of losing her much-needed income. Amazon took her off light-duty and back onto her heavy-duty job less than a week after her injury.

"I just was in so much pain," she said. "I was swelling up a lot. Six days after my injury they wouldn't let me do light duty anymore and they put me back on the station I was working—heavy duty. I tell you what—I lifted one item and it took my breath away. I said, 'I can't do this.' I went downstairs to get treated and said something is really not right here."

Amazon reportedly sent Tammy to a workers' compensation doctor who is a part of Amazon's approved network of company doctors. Many workers say Amazon requires them to travel long distances to these doctors who often downplay their injuries or tell them their injuries "pre-existed" their work accidents.

In Tammy's case, she reports that her Amazon-approved doctor told her she merely had "whiplash" and that all she needed was physical therapy. She says her doctor told her she did not need an MRI or X-ray and that the physical therapy made her condition worse.

"I'm fed up at this point because I was at the point where I couldn't even turn my head to the left because of the swelling and pain. I have cervical spine injuries, my left arm, nerve damage, left shoulder, a tear in my left wrist. I have two ganglion cysts, one behind the other, from pushing that machine away from me. I had to do it so speedily or that machine would have killed me."

She hired an attorney who recommended an impartial doctor. Tammy says this doctor "was just shaking his head" when he heard the Amazon-linked doctor initially diagnosed her with "whiplash." The new doctor "thought it was unbelievable" and told her she had "serious injuries" that she will have to deal with for the rest of her life.

She says Amazon's assessor, Sedgwick, fought to deny her the right to go to an orthopedic surgeon. Different doctors were fighting over her "impairment rating," an equation used to determine how injured she is and how much money she is entitled to through workers' compensation.

Tammy went to court and appeared before an administrative judge. She soon learned how the court system is rigged against the working class.

"I went to a couple hearings," she says, "and at my third one I wasn't allowed to tell my story or say anything that happened to me. I wasn't allowed to say anything about the handwritten documents that were never presented in my case. There wasn't even a court reporter.

"I asked the judge, 'Can I please speak' over and over again. 'May I tell my story?' I asked. The judge wouldn't even look at me. 'You are only allowed to answer the questions,' she said. I felt like I was a criminal or something instead of the victim. I'm the victim. It was humiliating. This whole system has let me and so many people down.

"The Amazon lawyer, she kept saying I was more capable of working. There were a lot of lies in there. They wouldn't let me go back on light duty and I needed to have an income."

She reports that the judge gave her a workers' compensation award amounting to a little over \$1,000 per month—not nearly enough to live on. She only takes home \$856 per month because she has to pay her attorney fees. To receive payments, she says she is required to perform five job searches each week for a year. "So, the judge awarded me an impairment rating at 15 percent but now I have to go earn the money? It makes no sense at all."

She says the judge did not require workers' compensation to pay for her to see an orthopedic surgeon to treat her injuries: "My attorney said I'll have to go get insurance and pay out of pocket. I can't afford insurance and I don't even qualify for Medicaid. Isn't that terrible?"

"It is very rough living on that little," she explains. "For a long time, I wasn't getting anything. When I did, I've been staying in motels, I've lived in my car, I was in Wal-Mart parking lots, I was at a campsite for a while and I had no electric, no water. I've had to move in and stay with different family and friends from time to time trying to get my way through this."

Now, Tammy says she pays \$575 per month for a cheap motel room, far more than half her workers' compensation payments.

"I do not eat three meals a day," she says. "I have gone to pantries but there is only so much you can do. I can't keep food, I don't have a stove to cook on." She is currently in a motel. "My son put me in the motel because I was sleeping in the parking lot by the emergency room. I felt safer there. I always made sure I parked near a big light, I had my windows down just a little even though it got hot, my doors locked with my keys and my cell phone in my hand."

She was approved to drive with the ride-sharing program Lyft, but "I was not making any money and I could only drive a few hours here and there because of my injury. I didn't even make enough money to cover the rental on the car. I ended up sleeping in the Lyft car."

Now, Tammy says the corporation that handles Amazon's long-term disability payments is trying to force her to pay \$12,700 in back payments. Since she partially won her workers' compensation case, the company says she is not entitled to previous long-term disability payments.

"I said, 'I don't have the money.' I had to pay bills, I was so in debt. I'm injured but I have to pay them back? I was like, 'Did you not realize I had to move out of my place and in with family and then I was homeless?' I told this lady, 'You have it all figured out don't you.' It's all part of Amazon. She did not say one word back to me."

Tammy says Amazon has since fired her. When her workers' compensation payments end, she isn't sure what she will do next. Adding insult to injury, Amazon says when she is fully healed she can try to get her old job back. She has set up a Go Fund Me page to help get by.

"The whole system is for the big corporations. It's not fair. Our lives are important. It hurts me physically to even hold my granddaughter, who was an infant when I was first hurt. I couldn't even be around her because she is too beautiful and I am tempted to hold her. They make me feel like a burden on my family but I can't help it. I hate the lies. More than anything I hate Amazon's lies."

Any last words? we asked.

"We have to speak out."

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