Restaurant Ergonomics Fatality File



Amy’s Kitchen says its food is made with ‘love.’ Some at the factory say the job has left them injured.

When Ines De La Luz showed up for work at the Amy’s Kitchen factory in Santa Rosa, California, wearing an arm brace, prescribed after she couldn’t move her hand at the end of a fast-paced shift making frozen burritos in July 2020, she says a supervisor ordered her to remove the brace and return to the production line.

It was the start of a 1½-year ordeal that would send her back and forth to a doctor who she says hesitated to give her tougher work restrictions, and eventually to a new job in the factory disinfecting the cafeteria, alongside other injured workers.

De La Luz and another injured worker who cleans the cafeteria say it was called “the corral,” like on a farm. Though they aren’t sure where the name originated, they say it highlighted the feeling that they were no longer important to the company, a family business that is one of the country’s top makers of vegetarian frozen and canned food. De La Luz says that in the fall of 2021, when she learned she was a candidate for surgery to treat her arm injury, Amy’s Kitchen told her it was eliminating her position in the cafeteria and laid her off.

“There are a lot of days that I think that I’m good for nothing, that my life will never be the same and that I’ll never live without pain again,” she said.

Amy’s Kitchen declined to comment on the specific accounts given by De La Luz and four other workers interviewed by NBC News, citing company privacy policy. “It saddens us to hear that a few of our employees may be having a poor experience with us,” Chief People Officer Mike Resch, who spoke on behalf of the company, said as part of a statement.

Ojeda says she first felt pain in her hand in 2006, but a manager told her it was probably her pregnancy hormones. By the time she finally underwent surgery in 2008, the tendon in her right wrist was hanging on by a thread, she said. “A lot of the workers don’t even call it human resources. They call inhumane resources because they really don’t care,” she said.

Ojeda noticed pain in her arm again in 2019 but says that she was required to

show a doctor’s note before she was assigned a new job weighing plates of tamales only with her left arm. Then that side started to hurt, too. But when she complained, Ojeda says that she was again told that she needed a doctor’s note to prove she was injured. Ojeda says she was finally given paid time-off when she showed up to work with another doctor’s note and braces on both arms.

After working in the factory for 28 years, and surviving cancer in 2004, Janet Barcenas has chronic pain in her shoulder and her leg, and her doctor told her she will never recover completely. Her doctor wrote a note in 2020 requesting that she be allowed to use a chair while on the line. A supervisor initially rejected the request, she says, telling her “We’re not just going to do what the doctor says. We’re going to do what we think is best.” Barcenas says she complained again, telling a supervisor “That I was speaking not just for me, but for everybody.”