Warehouse Woes: Fatality Report



INCIDENT

Amazon the world's largest retailer with a gigantic warehouse system, has left workers suffering from workplace accidents and injuries that left them homeless, unable to work and bereft of income.

The following are stories from real people who were initially excited by the idea of working for one of the fastest growing corporations in the world. That feeling dissipated quickly for these people.

Vicky Allen, aged 49 started working at Amazon as a counter in a warehouse at Haslet, Texas in May / 17.

Vicky Allen injured her back-counting goods on a workstation that was missing a brush guard, a piece of safety equipment meant to prevent products from falling onto the floor. She used a tote bin to try to compensate for the missing brush guard, and hurt her back while counting in an awkward position. The injury was the beginning of an ongoing ordeal she is still working to amend at Amazon. Over the course of a few weeks, Amazon's medical triage area gave her use of a heating pad to use on her back, while Amazon management sent her home each day without pay until Allen pushed for workers compensation.

"I tried to work again, but I couldn't stretch my right arm out and I'm right-handed. So I was having a hard time keeping up. This went on for about three weeks," Allen said. Despite not getting paid, Allen was spending her own money to drive 60 miles one way to the warehouse each day just to be sent home.

Once on workers compensation, Allen started going to physical therapy. In January 2018, she returned to work and injured herself again on the same workstation that still was not fixed.

Allen went back on medical leave and took an additional two weeks of unpaid leave because she didn't have the money to drive to work. In April 2018, an MRI scan showed her back was still injured, but just five days after her diagnosis, she claims Amazon's workers compensation insurer, Sedgwick, had the company doctor drop her as a patient.

"By June 2018, they finally had that station fixed. It took them eight months to put one little brush guard on this station," Allen said. On 2 July, she met with

management at the Amazon fulfillment center, who offered her a week of paid leave for the issues she had to deal with over the past nine months.

“They’re also going to pay me for 24 more hours for last week. They haven’t said anything else,” Allen explained.” They offered me a buyout, only for $3,500, which meant I would have to sign a non-disclosure agreement to not say anything derogatory about Amazon or my experience.”

In April 2018, 43-year-old Bryan Hill of Seffner, Florida filed a lawsuit against Amazon, alleging managers fired him for hurting his back on the job and failed to file a workers compensation claim once his injury was reported. “It’s been scheduled for mediation in September, and we’re in a holding pattern until then,” said Miguel Bouzas, the attorney representing Hill in the lawsuit. According to the lawsuit, Hill was told by a manager he was too young to have back problems, and he was fired before Amazon Human Resources would authorize a doctor visit.

At an Amazon Fulfillment Center in Pennsylvania, one former employee was fired five weeks after getting injured on the job. “I was on a ladder and someone came flying into the area I was in, hit the ladder causing me to fall, and I landed on my back and left leg,” said Christina Miano-Wilburn. Her back is permanently injured from the incident. “They refused to give me the paperwork for workmen’s comp. They cut my short-term disability after five weeks. I was supposed to get it for 26 weeks.”

Lindsai Florence Johnson, who was taken away in an ambulance in April during a hot day while working at an Amazon fulfillment center in San Bernardino, California. She had succumbed to fatigue and exhaustion the fulfillment center work environment. “I felt they thought and I was faking. I was dehydrated and dizzy.”

Michael Yevtuck has been in and out of court over a worker’s compensation claim against Integrity Staffing, who hired him to work in a Robbinsville, New Jersey based Amazon fulfillment center.

“I was squatting full speed and going up the step ladder as many times as I could an hour to try to hit the rates. All that squatting hurt my left knee, so I favored the other one and hurt that one,” said Yevtuck, who hurt his knees in November 2015.

An Amazon company doctor recommended he return to work on light duty and gave him braces for each knee. Yevtuck provided documents corroborating his medical diagnoses from Amazon company doctors and private doctors. “As soon as I came back, the supervisor returned me back to a job that was full duty and I reinjured both knees.”

He added Amazon told him to return to work, or work a light duty job if he signed a form stating his injuries occurred prior to working at Amazon. An MRI he received in April 2016 from a private doctor noted he tore the meniscus in his left knee, but Amazon would not pay his medical fees or accept his workers compensation filing.

NEED TO KNOW

Amazon warehouses were listed on the National Council for Occupational Safety

and Health's "dirty dozen" list of most dangerous places to work in the United States in April 2018. The company made the list due to its pattern of unsafe working conditions and its focus on productivity and efficiency over the safety and livelihood of its employees. Amazon's emphasis on fulfilling a high demand of orders has resulted in unsafe working conditions for its warehouse employees.

BUSINESS / REGULATIONS

Amazon is now the world's most valuable retailer. Its customers are served by over 140 fulfillment centers like the one where Vicky Allen worked across the US. The revenues from these centers have made founder Jeff Bezos the world's richest man, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index.

Amazon has 60 billion a year in retail sales. Amazon frequently utilizes temporary and contract employees to reduce costs and abilities associated with full time staff, including health insurance, retirement pay and workers compensation.

Amazon meanwhile insists that ensuring the safety of its workers is a priority and that it was "proud" of its record.

"Amazon has created over 130,000 jobs in the last year alone and now employs over 560,000 people around the world. Ensuring the safety of these associates is our number one priority," said Amazon spokesperson Melanie Etches in an email, who also pointed to the firm's Safety Leadership Program as an example of being proactive on the issue.

"Operational meetings, new hire orientation, process training and new process development begin with safety and have safety metrics and audits integrated within each program … While any serious incident is one too many, we learn and improve our programs working to prevent future incidents," Etches said.

The aforementioned former employees of Amazon reveal some of the impact of Amazon treatment of its employees.

- **Vicky Allen** rejected the buyout offer of 3500.00 to speak out against Amazon's treatment of her. She currently lives out of her car in the parking lot of the Amazon fulfillment center. "They cost me my home, they screwed me over and over and I go days without eating."
- **Bryan Hill** was told by a manager he too young to have back problems, and he was fired before Amazon human resources would authorize a doctor visit.
- **Christina Miano-Wilburn** was notified of her job termination through a letter in the email in May 2017 after working at Amazon for two years. She lost her home shortly after being fired from Amazon.
- **Lindsai Florence Johnson** quit in May 2018 over mistreatment after starting in June 2017. "Not all people report injuries because they are scared to get taken off their job or told they can't work over three anymore. I have many times come home with bruises form work at Amazon and Experienced my first hernia there."
- **Michael Yevtuck**

Amazon workers like Michael are left to deal with the temp agency that hired them, shifting the burden of responsibility to a third party and making it more difficult for workers to receive proper treatment and compensation.

STATISTICS

New report issued by the National Council for Occupational safety with Health, a private non-profit workers advocacy group delivered findings Amazon's record in the workplace relevant to safety.

- Amazon workers suffer injuries in a work environment with a relentless demand to fill orders and close monitoring of employee actions.
- Seven Amazon workers have died on or near the job since 2013.

The seven workers at Amazon who lost their lives were involved in several different kinds of accidents and crashes. According to the report, two were crushed by forklifts in the warehouses, one was run over by a truck, one was killed by an SUV driver, one suffered a fatal heart-related event during an overnight shift, one was dragged and crushed by a conveyor belt, and one was killed and crushed by a pallet loader.

- Amazon was named or one of NCOHS's "dirty dozen" companies on a not so famous list.
- Criteria for inclusion included severity of injuries to workers; exposure to unnecessary and preventable risk; repeat citations by relevant state federal authorities.

PREVENTION – "AN OUNCE AND A POUND"

If safety procedures and workplace hazards are disregarded in warehouses to cut cost, it exposes workers to serious risks of accident, injury and death.

To prevent this from occurring, the following must be implemented:

- Provide worker training on hazard awareness.
- Conduct periodic safety inspections.
- Implement safety measures.
- Instill a mentality of vigilance in the mindset of the workplace.

Here are some common warehouse safety Hazards and Safety tips to ensure safety in the warehouse.

Hazard 1. Forklift

Forklifts are critical pieces of equipment used in warehousing and storage facilities. However, when operated incorrectly can cause serious damage to operators, nearby workers and property. Unsafe use of forklifts is the most often cited hazard in warehousing operations by OSHA.

- Ensure all forklift operators are competent and have completed certified training. Perform regular refresher training and evaluation when an operator is observed operating the vehicle in an unsafe manner.
- Perform daily pre-start forklift equipment inspections to check for controls and equipment damage.

Hazard 2. Docks

One of the worst accidents a worker could suffer when working in a warehouse is being pinned or crushed between a forklift truck and the loading dock. This can typically occur when a forklift runs off the dock and strikes a person.

- Forklift operators must be attentive and drive slowly on dock plates, make sure dock edges are clear and safe to support loads.
- Always ensure that warning signs and mechanisms are in place to prevent people from getting near docks.

Hazard 3. Conveyors

Conveyor equipment is commonly used in warehouse facilities to transport goods. However, conveyors pose serious dangers to workers including getting caught in equipment and being struck by falling objects.

- Ensure proper safeguarding equipment between the conveyor and the worker to protect against entanglement of clothing, body parts and hair.
- Follow proper lock out tag out procedures during conveyor maintenance and repairs.

Hazard 4. Materials storage

Improper stacking of loads and storage of materials in shelves can result in unintended slip and trip hazards for nearby workers.

- Keep aisles and passageways clear and in good condition, this prevents workers from slipping, tripping, or falling.
- Loads should be placed evenly and properly positioned, heavier loads must be stacked on lower or middle shelves. Always remember to remove one load at a time.

Hazard 5. Manual Lifting/ Handling

The most common cause of physical injuries in warehouse and storage facilities involves improper manual lifting and handling. Manual lifting or handling can cause musculoskeletal disorders if done with awkward postures, repetitive motions, or overexertion.

- Plan ahead and determine if the need for lifting can be minimized by applying good engineering design techniques.
- Observe proper ergonomic posture when carrying or moving loads. If products are too heavy, ask assistance from a co-worker.

Hazard 6. Hazardous Chemicals

When handling hazardous chemicals in your warehouse or storage facilities, a hazard communication program should be implemented. Your hazard communication program should cover effective training on identifying chemical hazards, proper handling, storage, and disposal of chemicals, and the use of appropriate PPE.

Hazard 7. Charging Stations

Charging stations in warehouse facilities are used to refuel or recharge all powered equipment to function. Units may be powered by gasoline, liquid petroleum gas (LPG), or battery. If proper guidelines are not followed, fires and explosions can occur.

- Charging stations should be away from open flames. Smoking should be prohibited. Fire extinguishers should be available and in good working condition in case of fire.

- An adequate ventilation system must be installed to disperse harmful gases. Proper PPE should be worn. Eye washing and shower facilities should be present should employees get exposed to acids and chemicals.

Hazard 8. Energized Equipment

A Lockout/Tagout (LOTO) program must be implemented in all warehouse operations to ensure that all energized equipment is properly shut off and prevent employees from being caught between mechanical parts or being electrocuted. All affected workers must be trained on LOTO procedures and how to apply and remove LOTO devices after performing maintenance.

Accidents do not appear magically in the workplace. Accidents are caused by action or lack of action of people in the workplace.

Most accidents in the workplace are preventable. All of the preventable action outlined is preferable to:

- Workers compensations claims
- Business down time
- Loss of wages of employees
- Dislocation in workplace
- Increased insurance costs
- Medical and legal costs
- Regulatory issues
- Physical injury, illness and even fatalities of workers.

An ounce of prevention yields a pound of cure. The benefits of taking preventative action for workplace safety far outweighs the negative issues associated with workplace accidents that result in illness, injury and death.