

Temp work past the age of retirement

Amazon's CamperForce program exploits elderly workers

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Across the US, thousands of workers living in mobile homes—many of them in their 50s, 60s and 70s—have begun grueling, months-long temporary jobs at Amazon facilities as part of the company's "CamperForce" program. Launched in 2008, CamperForce targets the growing population of elderly migrant workers that have been forced to live in mobile homes after losing their homes, retirement and life savings in the 2008 housing crisis and ensuing economic recession.

Currently, Amazon is accepting applications for CamperForce positions in Shephardsville and Hebron, Kentucky, with wages listed at \$11 per hour and "up to \$11.50" per hour, respectively. Both applications claim, "Associates will also be entitled, during the term of employment, to such paid time off, medical, and other employee benefits as the Company may offer from time to time, subject to applicable eligibility requirements."

The poverty wages, paltry benefits that the company "may offer" and the highly unstable living and working conditions faced by these workers exposes the lie that there has been an economic "recovery" for the vast majority of the American population. Recent studies have found that all job growth in the US between 2005 and 2015 stems from temporary help agency workers, on-call workers, contract workers, and so-called independent contractors. This sub-class of highly-exploited and disposable workers has become a central pillar for companies such as Amazon, which announced last month that it intends to hire an estimated 120,000 temporary workers for its upcoming holiday season of peak sales.

Among seniors, 2008 had a devastating impact, with thousands losing their homes and life savings as part of the collapse of the subprime mortgage market. Inequality between wealthy and low-income seniors in the US has grown steadily, to the point where the gap is now greater than in all but two of the thirty-five OECD member nations—Chile and Mexico.

This growth of inequality has led directly to declining life expectancy among seniors, as documented in the Society of Actuaries' annual mortality improvement scale, which found that life expectancy for 65-year-old men and women declined from 85.8 and 87.8 years to 85.6 and 87.6 years respectively

between 2014 and 2015, the first year-over-year decrease since 2005.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that 12 percent of those 70 or older are still working today, compared to 6.7 percent in 1985, while the AARP reports that 80 percent of Baby Boomers expect to continue working in retirement out of necessity.

In her recently published book, *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*, author Jessica Bruder details the experiences of a variety of workers who have either chosen or been forced to abandon their traditional homes and live their lives in mobile homes, or so-called "recreational vehicles" (RVs).

Bruder devotes a chapter of her book to the plight of CamperForce workers and the role that Amazon plays in exploiting this section of the workforce. This chapter details the lives of Chuck and Barb Stout, now 73 and 60 years old, respectively.

Both Chuck and Barb were devastated by the 2008 financial meltdown, losing their homes and entire life savings, and being forced to purchase an RV from Barb's brother for \$500. They became migrant laborers, following temporary work across the country and living from paycheck to paycheck.

In the mid-2000s, as Amazon expanded its business into an all-encompassing online marketplace, the company established their network of warehouses and distribution centers to store their immense variety of merchandise. Every year, they proved unprepared for the annual growth in sales surrounding the Cyber Monday and Christmas holidays, what came to be known as "peak season."

Thus, amid the housing crisis in 2008 Amazon tried hiring a team of migrant RVers to work at a facility in Coffeyville, Kansas. This venture proved successful, so the following year the company expanded the program to warehouses in Campbellsville, Kentucky, and Fernley, Nevada, and since then they've expanded to over a dozen states across the US.

As part of the CamperForce program, Amazon hires workers on temporary contracts from early October until December 23, paying them near minimum wage while covering the expenses

of staying in an RV park, excluding the cost of propane. In blog posts, some who have gone through the experience compare the campsites to the Hoovervilles of the Great Depression.

The company targets older workers, who they believe have a stronger work ethic than their younger counterparts. Bruder reports that Kelly Calmes, a CamperForce representative, states in one online recruiting seminar: “We’ve had folks in their eighties who do a phenomenal job for us. [...] You guys have put in a lifetime of work. You understand what work is.”

Like all other Amazon warehouse workers, the mostly elderly CamperForce workers are forced to labor under sweatshop conditions, often walking upwards of 13 miles a day throughout the warehouse.

Barb and Chuck began their first CamperForce job in Fernley, Nevada in 2013. In her book, Bruder reports, “Chuck and Barb found that they had a lot in common with their fellow workers, who came from all corners of the United States. Many had seen their retirement savings vanish in the stock market or had lost homes to foreclosure. Others had watched businesses go under or grappled with unemployment and ageism. A larger number had become full-time RVers or vandwellers because they could no longer afford traditional housing—what they called ‘sticks and bricks.’ They talked about how Social Security wasn’t enough to cover the basic necessities and about the yoke of debt from every imaginable source: medical bills, maxed-out credit cards, even student loans.”

Bruder notes, “On days off, many of Barb and Chuck’s coworkers were too exhausted to do anything but sleep, eat, and catch up on laundry. [...] As the season wore on, people complained of plantar fasciitis, tendinitis, and repetitive stress injuries, including a condition called trigger finger, which came from using a handheld scanner gun over and over.”

In the face of these and other ailments, the only medical support provided by Amazon involves bare-bones first aid stations with “free generic pain relievers on offer in the warehouse.”

The Stouts continued working for CamperForce the following two peak seasons, including at a warehouse in Haslet, Texas in 2015, at which point Chuck was 71 and Barb was 58. This time, they had to camp 34 miles from the facility, and were forced to wake up at 4am to make it to their 6am shift on time, due to traffic. “We went to work in the dark, and we came home in the dark,” Chuck told Bruder.

In Haslet, Chuck worked as a “water spider,” a position similar to that of a janitor. Bruder writes, “He was in constant motion, walking about 15 miles per shift, pausing only on rare occasions. One such occasion came when a box flew off a conveyor belt and knocked him flat on the ground. The sound of his head hitting the concrete floor was terrifyingly loud; in an instant, he was surrounded by worried coworkers and an Amazon medic. The medic held up a finger, asking Chuck to watch as he moved it slowly back and forth. Soon he had good news: Chuck hadn’t sustained a concussion. So he went back to

work. (Amazon declined to comment on the incident.)”

While the Stouts and thousands of other elderly workers are forced to spend their golden years in toil and economic hardship, the social layer of Wall Street banker and swindlers responsible for their poverty has amassed unfathomable wealth since 2008. Over the past year alone, the wealth of the world’s billionaires increased by 17 percent, or nearly \$1 trillion, surpassing a total of \$6 trillion.

Amazon’s 53-year-old CEO Jeff Bezos embodies the process of wealth redistribution that has taken place since 2008, with Bezos having accrued nearly all of his estimated \$94.6 billion since the 2008 financial crisis. By targeting low-income and socially devastated regions as prime locations for its immense warehouses, Amazon has emerged from the rubble of the economic crisis as the world’s preeminent online retail giant and the largest source of all retail growth worldwide.

As thousands of CamperForce and other seasonal temporary workers join the ranks of Amazon’s year-round workforce, their labor is further propelling the company’s stock value on an unprecedented upswing.

Last month, Bezos became the richest person in the world after he amassed \$10.4 billion in a single day, riding an Amazon stock boom. Since the 2008 crash, his wealth has grown by over \$85 billion, enough money to both end homelessness in the US and provide water and sanitation services for the entire global population.

If Bezos’ total wealth were divided among all 120,000 of Amazon’s temporary workers this holiday season, each would receive a bonus of \$788,333, more than enough to buy a nice home and live out their lives in comfortable retirement.



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