

OSHA delays release of reports on Amazon worker deaths in New Jersey

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Amazon workers: tell us what conditions at your workplace have been. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

During the sweltering summer of 2022, three workers died at separate Amazon warehouses in New Jersey. Rafael Mota Frias, Rodger Boland and Eric Vadinsky all died within weeks of each other. In each case, brutal conditions marked by extremely high temperatures within the warehouses were responsible for the deaths. Despite this clear pattern, the company denies all responsibility.

But investigations into these deaths by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) did not attribute the fatalities to the excessive heat or any other workplace factors, leaving the company blameless.

Amazon, a huge transnational corporation, is one of the American state's largest employers. It is notorious for poor pay and dangerous working conditions, resulting in a high rate of workplace injuries. The company reported a 54 percent increase in injuries at its New Jersey warehouses from 2021 to 2022. Furthermore, a Rutgers University and New Jersey Policy Perspective 2022 report found that Amazon workers suffered injuries at a rate "almost twice as high as the injury rate among all other warehouse workers in 2021." The brutal conditions lead to a 124 percent worker turnover rate in 2020 in the state.

A request for the OSHA report under the Freedom Of Information Act was filed on August 14 by WarehouseLife, an Amazon workers' rights group, disputing the finding that extreme heat was not a factor in these deaths and demanding the release of details of the OSHA records and findings. Only the OSHA report of the first death has been made public.

They have yet to receive a response to their request.

This is unusual because records collected during such investigations are usually made public at their conclusion.

The lack of response by OSHA has prompted a court filing on behalf of a lawsuit on November 26 by Daniel Schlademan, an organizer with the Online to Offline Strategy Group on behalf of Warehouse Life, demanding that the Department of Labor release the requested information.

What little is known about these deaths strongly implies that physical stress caused by elevated temperatures at each workplace likely created conditions that caused these tragedies.

The first death, that of Rafael Reynaldo Mota Frias, 42, took place on July 13 at the Carteret fulfillment center during Amazon's high-pressure Prime Day. At that time, New Jersey was experiencing a heat wave with high temperatures in the 90s (32-38 Celsius). Coworkers have said that he pleaded for fans in the work area, which is not air conditioned, hours before his death. According to the workers, management told them to work through the heat.

Despite this, OSHA listed the cause of death as cardiac arrest, which it attributed to a pre-existing medical condition unrelated to excessive temperatures. At the time, Amazon denied that high heat in the warehouse was to blame.

However, it was reported that the air conditioning system at the Carteret facility was upgraded a month after Mota Frias' death, a de facto admission of deficient conditions. Coworkers report that Amazon threatened to fire anyone who contradicted the official story. Only the formal OSHA report on Mota Frias has so far been made public.

Roger Boland, the second fatality, suffered a fatal injury on July 24 at the Robbinsville warehouse while

falling from a ladder. He died three days later. Amazon has claimed that Boland's death was due to a seizure unrelated to conditions at the warehouse.

The lawsuit states that, according to the doctors at the hospital where he was treated, Boland suffered brain damage resulting from the fall, not a pre-existing condition, and that the victim had an extremely high body temperature at the time. The high temperature in New Jersey on July 24 was 95 degrees (35 degrees Celsius). The lawsuit further states that, following Boland's death, Amazon had denied OSHA access to the room where the accident happened for several weeks, until temperatures had cooled.

Eric Vadinsky, a worker at an Amazon delivery facility in Monroe, was hospitalized on August 4 and died four days later. Further details on his death are not publicly available pending release of the OSHA report.

In July, OSHA proposed a federal heat standard rule for workplaces. The rule would apply to all employers and be triggered when employees are exposed to temperatures of 80 degrees fahrenheit (27 degrees celsius) for more than 15 minutes in any given sixty-minute period. This is not only way overdue, but unlikely to be implemented under the incoming Trump administration, which has vowed to gut business regulations. Efforts in New Jersey to enact workplace heat protections have gone nowhere.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 500 workers died from heat exposure in the US between 2011 and 2022.

With accelerating climate change leading to hotter summers, heat-related workplace injuries and deaths will inevitably increase. The capitalist crisis will only drive businesses to intensify worker exploitation while reducing workplace safety, which cuts into profits.



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