

I Was a Warehouse Wage Slave

My brief, backbreaking, rage-inducing, low-paying, dildo-packing time inside the online-shipping machine.

GABRIEL MAC



Illustration by Mark Matcho

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“**Don’t take anything** that happens to you there personally,” the woman at the local chamber of commerce says when I tell her that tomorrow I start working at “Amalgamated Product Giant Shipping Worldwide Inc.” She winks at me. I stare at her for a second.

“*What?*” I ask. “Why, is somebody going to be mean to me or something?”

She smiles. “Oh, yeah.” This town somewhere west of the Mississippi is not big; everyone knows someone or *is* someone who’s worked for Amalgamated. “But look at it from their perspective. They need you to work as fast as possible to push out as much as they can as fast as they can. So they’re gonna give you goals, and then you know what? If you make those goals, they’re gonna increase the goals. But they’ll be yelling at you all the time. It’s like the military. They have to break you down so they can turn you into what they want you to be. So they’re going to tell you, ‘You’re not good enough, you’re not good enough, you’re not good enough,’ to make you work harder. Don’t say, ‘This is the best I can do.’ Say, ‘I’ll try,’ even if you know you can’t do it. Because if you say, ‘This is the best I can do,’ they’ll let you go. They hire and fire constantly, every day. You’ll see people dropping all around you. But don’t take it personally and break down or start crying when they yell at you.”

Several months prior, I’d reported on an Ohio warehouse where workers shipped products for online retailers under conditions that were surprisingly demoralizing and dehumanizing, even to someone who’s spent a lot of time working in warehouses, which I have. And then my editors sat me down. “We want you to go work for Amalgamated Product Giant Shipping Worldwide Inc.,” they said. I’d have to give my real name and job history when I applied, and I couldn’t lie if asked for any specifics. (I wasn’t.) But I’d smudge identifying details of people and the company itself. Anyway, to do otherwise might give people the impression that these conditions apply only to one warehouse or one company. Which they don’t.

So I fretted about whether I’d have to abort the application process, like if someone asked me why I wanted the job. But no one did. And though I was kind of excited to trot out my warehouse experience, mainly all I needed to get hired was to confirm 20 or 30 times that I had not been to prison.

The application process took place at a staffing office in a run-down city, the kind where there are boarded-up businesses and broken windows downtown and billboards advertising things like “Foreclosure Fridays!” at a local law firm. Six or seven other people apply for jobs along with me. We answer questions at computers grouped in several stations. Have I ever been to prison? The system asks. No? Well, but have I ever been to prison for assault? Burglary? A felony? A misdemeanor? Raping someone? Murdering anybody? Am I sure? There’s no point in lying, the computer warns me, because criminal-background checks are run on employees. Additionally, I have to confirm at the next computer station that I can read, by taking a multiple-choice test in which I’m

given pictures of several album covers, including Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*, and asked what the name of the Michael Jackson album is. At yet another set of computers I’m asked about my work history and character. How do I feel about dangerous activities? Would I say I’m not really into them? Or *really* into them?





Macduff Everton/Corbis

In the center of the room, a video plays loudly and continuously on a big screen. Even more than you are hurting the company, a voice-over intones as animated people do things like accidentally oversleep, you are hurting yourself when you are late because you will be penalized on a point system, and when you get too many points, you're fired—unless you're late at any point during your first week, in which case you are instantly fired. Also because when you're late or sick you miss the opportunity to maximize your overtime pay. And working more than eight hours is mandatory. Stretching is also mandatory, since you will either be standing still at a conveyor line for most of your minimum 10-hour shift or walking on concrete or metal stairs. And be careful, because you could seriously hurt yourself. And watch out, because some of your coworkers will be the kind of monsters who will file false workers' comp claims. If you know of someone doing this and you tell on him and he gets convicted, you will be rewarded with \$500.

The computers screening us for suitability to pack boxes or paste labels belong to a temporary-staffing agency. The stuff we order from big online retailers lives in large warehouses, owned and operated either by the retailers themselves or by third-party logistics contractors, a.k.a. 3PLs. These companies often fulfill orders for more than one retailer out of a single warehouse. America's largest 3PL, Exel, has 86 million square feet of warehouse in North America; it's a subsidiary of Deutsche Post DHL, which is cute because Deutsche Post is the German post office, which was privatized in the 1990s and bought DHL in 2002, becoming one of the world's biggest corporate employers. The \$31 billion "value-added warehousing and distribution" sector of 3PLs is just a fraction of what large 3PLs' parent companies pull in. UPS's logistics division, for example, pulls in more than a half a billion, but it feeds billions of dollars of business to UPS Inc.

"Leave your pride and your personal life at the door," the lady at the chamber of commerce says, if I want to last as an online warehouse worker.

time—though not too much since my first day starts at 5 a.m.—but I end up getting useful job advice.

"Well, what if I do start crying?" I ask the woman who warns me to keep it together no matter how awfully I'm treated. "Are they really going to fire me for that?"

"Yes," she says. "There's 16 other people who want your job. Why would they keep a person who gets emotional, especially in this economy?"

Still, she advises, regardless of how much they push me, don't work so hard that I injure myself. I'm young. I have a long life ahead of me. It's not worth it to do permanent physical damage, she says, which, considering that I got hired at elevensomething dollars an hour, is a bit of an understatement.

As the sun gets lower in the curt November sky, I thank the woman for her help. When I start toward the door, she repeats her "No. 1 rule of survival" one more time.

"Leave your pride and your personal life at the door." If there's any way I'm going to last, she says, tomorrow I have to start pretending like I don't have either.

Though it's inconvenient for most employees, the rural location of the Amalgamated Product Giant Shipping Worldwide Inc. warehouse isn't an accident. The town is bisected by a primary interstate, close to a busy airport, serviced by several major highways. There's a lot of rail out here. The town became a station stop on the way to more important places a hundred years ago, and it now feeds part of the massive transit networks used to get consumers anywhere goods from everywhere. Every now and then, a long line of railcars rolls past my hotel and gives my room a good shake. I don't ever get a good look at them, because it's dark outside when I go to work, and dark again when I get back.

Inside Amalgamated, an employee's first day is training day. Though we're not paid to be here until 6, we have been informed that we need to arrive at 5. If we don't show up in time to stand around while they sort out who we are and where they've put our ID badges, we could miss the beginning of training, which would mean termination. "I was up half the night because I was so afraid I was going to be late," a woman in her 60s tells me. I was, too. A minute's tardiness after the first week earns us 0.5 penalty points, an hour's tardiness is worth 1 point, and an absence 1.5; 6 is the number that equals "release." But during the first week even a minute's tardiness gets us fired. When we get lined up so we can be counted a third or fourth time, the woman conducting the roll call recognizes the last name of a young trainee. "Does your dad work here? Or uncle?" she asks. "Grandpa," he says, as another supervisor snaps at the same time, sounding not mean but very stressed out, "We gotta get goin' here."

The culture is intense, an Amalgamated higher-up acknowledges at the beginning of our training. He's speaking to us from a video, one of several videos—about company policies, sexual harassment, etc.—that we watch while we try to keep our eyes open. We don't want to be so intense, the higher-up says. But our customers demand it. We are surrounded by signs that state our productivity goals. Other signs proclaim that a good customer experience, to which our goal-meeting is essential, is the key to growth, and growth is the key to lower prices, which leads to a better customer experience. There is no room for inefficiencies.

Anyhow, regardless of whether the retailer itself or a 3PL contractor houses and processes the stuff you buy, the actual stuff is often handled by people working for yet another company—a temporary-staffing agency. The agency to which I apply is hiring 4,000 drones for this single Amalgamated warehouse between October and December. Four thousand. Before leaving the staffing office, I'm one of them.

I'm assigned a schedule of Sunday through Thursday, 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. When additional overtime is necessary, which it will be soon (Christmas!), I should expect to leave at 7 or 7:30 p.m. instead. Eight days after applying, i.e., after my drug test has cleared, I walk through a small, desolate town nearly an hour outside the city where I was hired. This is where the warehouse is, way out here, a long commute for many of my coworkers. I wander off the main road and into the chamber of commerce to kill some afternoon

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is the key to lower prices, which leads to a better customer experience. There is no room for mistakes.

The gal conducting our training reminds us again that we cannot miss any days our first week. There are *NO* exceptions to this policy. She says to take Brian, for example, who's here with us in training today. Brian already went through this training, but then during his first week his lady had a baby, so he missed a day and he had to be fired. Having to start the application process over could cost a brand-new dad like Brian a couple of weeks' worth of work and pay. Okay? Everybody turn around and look at Brian. Welcome back, Brian. Don't end up like Brian.

Soon, we move on to practical training. Like all workplaces with automated and heavy machinery, this one contains plenty of ways to get hurt, and they are enumerated. There are transition points in the warehouse floor where the footing is uneven, and people trip and sprain ankles. Give forklifts that are raised up several stories to access products a wide berth: "If a pallet falls on you, you won't be working with us anymore." Watch your fingers around the conveyor belts that run waist-high throughout the entire facility. People lose fingers. Or parts of fingers. And about once a year, they tell us, someone in an Amalgamated warehouse gets caught by the hair, and when a conveyor belt catches you by the hair, it doesn't just take your hair with it. It rips out a piece of scalp as well.

If the primary message of one-half of our practical training is Be Careful, the takeaway of the other half is Move As Fast As Humanly Possible. Or superhumanly possible. I have been hired as a picker, which means my job is to find, scan, place in a plastic tote, and send away via conveyor whatever item within the multiple stories of this several-hundred-thousand-square-foot warehouse my scanner tells me to. We are broken into groups and taught how to read the scanner to find the object among some practice shelves. Then we immediately move on to practicing doing it faster, racing each other to fill the orders our scanners dictate, then racing each other to put all the items back.



Home Depot Chris Mueller/Redux

"Hurry up," a trainer encourages me when he sees me pulling ahead of the others, "and you can put the other items back!" I roll my eyes that my reward for doing a good job is that I get to do more work, but he's got my number: I am exactly the kind of freak this sort of motivation appeals to. I win, and set myself on my prize of the bonus errand.

That afternoon, we are turned loose in the warehouse, scanners in hand. And that's when I realize that for whatever relative youth and regular exercise and overachievement complexes I have brought to this job, I will never be able to keep up with the goals I've been given.

The place is immense. Cold, cavernous. Silent, despite thousands of people quietly doing their picking, or standing along the conveyors quietly packing or box-taping, nothing noisy but the occasional whir of a passing forklift. My scanner tells me in what exact section—there are nine merchandise sections, so sprawling that there's a map attached to my ID badge—of vast shelving systems the item I'm supposed to find resides. It also tells me how many seconds it thinks I should take to get there. Dallas sector, section yellow, row H34, bin 22, level D: wearable blanket. Battery-operated flour sifter. Twenty seconds. I count how many steps it takes me to speed-walk to my destination: 20. At 5-foot-9, I've got a decently long stride, and I only cover the 20 steps *and* locate the exact shelving unit in the allotted time if I don't hesitate for one second or get lost or take a drink of water before heading in the right direction as fast as I can walk or even occasionally jog. Olive-oil mister. Male libido enhancement pills. Rifle strap. Who the fuck buys their paper towels off the internet? Fairy calendar. Neoprene lunch bag. Often as not, I miss my time target.

TOP 60

US Online Retailers

1. Amazon
2. Staples
3. Apple
4. Dell
5. Office Depot
6. Walmart
7. Sears

8. Liberty Media Corp. (QVC)
9. Office Max
10. CDW Corp.

11. Best Buy
12. Newegg
13. Netflix
14. Sony USA
15. W.W. Grainger
16. Costco
17. Macy's
18. Victoria Secret and Bath & Body Works
19. HP Home & Home Office Store
20. J.C. Penney
21. L.L. Bean
22. Target
23. Systemax
24. Gap
25. Williams-Sonoma
26. HSN
27. Overstock.com
28. Amway Global
29. Toys R Us
30. Avon
31. Kohl's
32. Buy.com
33. Redcats USA
34. Nordstrom
35. Symantec
36. Vistaprint
37. PC Connection
38. Saks
39. Neiman Marcus
40. Cabela's
41. Barnes & Noble
42. Blockbuster
43. Home Depot
44. Musician's Friend
45. 1-800-Flowers.com
46. Drugstore.com
47. Peapod
48. Urban Outfitters

49. Gilt Groupe
50. J. Crew Group
51. CSN Stores
52. PC Mall
53. Foot Locker
54. Scholastic
55. Crate and Barrel
56. Abercrombie & Fitch
57. American Eagle Outfitters
58. Follett Higher Education group
59. US Auto Parts Network
60. Blue Nile

Source: *Internet Retailer Top 500 Guide*

Plenty of things can hurt my goals. The programs for our scanners are designed with the assumption that we disposable employees don't know what we're doing. Find a Rob Zombie Voodoo Doll in the blue section of the Rockies sector in the third bin of the A-level in row Z42, my scanner tells me. But if I punch into my scanner that it's not there, I have to prove it by scanning every single other item in the bin, though I swear on my life there's no Rob Zombie Voodoo Doll in this pile of 30 individually wrapped and bar-coded batteries that take me quite a while to beep one by one. It could be five minutes before I can move on to, and make it to, and find, my next item. That lapse is supposed to be mere seconds.

This week, we newbies need to make 75 percent of our total picking-volume targets. If we don't, we get "counseled." If the people in here who've been around longer than a few weeks don't make their 100 percent, they get counseled. *Why aren't you making your targets?* the supervisors will ask. You *really* need to make your targets.

More than 15 percent of pickers, packers, movers, and unloaders are temps. They make \$3 less an hour on average than permanent workers. And they can be "temporary" for years.

go in an instant, and replaced just as quickly.

Everyone in here is hustling. At the announcement to take one of our two 15-minute breaks, we hustle even harder. We pickers close out the totes we're currently filling and send them away on the conveyor belt, then make our way as fast as we can with the rest of the masses across the long haul of concrete between wherever we are and the break room, but not before passing through metal detectors, for which there is a line—we're required to be screened on our way out, though not on our way in; apparently the concern is that we're sneaking Xbox 360s up under our shirts, not bringing in weapons. If we *don't* set off the metal detector and have to be taken aside and searched, we can run into the break room and try to find a seat among the rows and rows and long-ass rows of tables. We lose more time if we want to pee—and I do want to pee, and when amid the panic about the time constraints it occurs to me that I don't have my period I toss a fist victoriously into the air—between the actual peeing and the waiting in line to pee in the nearest one of the two bathrooms, which has eight stalls in the ladies' and I'm not sure how many in the men's and serves thousands of people a day. Once I pare this process down as much as possible, by stringing a necktie through my belt loops because I can't find a metal-less replacement for my belt at the local Walmart—and if my underwear or butt-crack slips out, I've been warned, I can get penalized—and by leaving my car keys in the break room after a manager helps me find an admittedly "still risky" hiding place for them because we have no lockers and "things get stolen out of here all the time," I get myself up to seven minutes' worth of break time to inhale as many high-fat and -protein snacks as I can. People who work at Amalgamated are always working this fast. Right now, because it's almost Black Friday, there are just more of us doing it.

Then as quickly as we've come, we all run back. At the end of the 15 minutes, we're supposed to be back at whichever far-flung corner of the warehouse we came from, scanners in hand, working. We run to grab the wheeled carts we put the totes on. We run past each other and if we do say something, we say it as we keep moving. "How's the job market?" a supervisor says, laughing, as several of us newbies run by. "Just kidding!" Ha ha! "I know why you guys are here. That's why I'm here, too!" At another near collision between employees, one wants to know how complaining about not being able to get time off went and the other spits that he was told he was lucky to *have* a job. This is no way to have a conversation, but at least conversations are not forbidden, as they were in the Ohio warehouse I reported on—where I saw a guy get fired for talking, specifically for asking another employee, "Where are you from?" So I'm allowed the extravagance of smiling at a guy who is always so unhappy and saying, "How's it goin'?" And he can respond, "Terrible," as I'm running to the big industrial cage-lift that takes our carts up to the second or third floors, which involves walking under a big metal bar gating the front of it, and which I should really take my time around. Within the last month, three different people have needed stitches in the head after being clocked by these big metal bars, so it's dangerous. Especially the lift in the Dallas sector, whose bar has been installed wrong, so it is extra prone to falling, they tell us. Be careful. Seriously, though. We really need to meet our goals here.

It's a welcome distraction from the pain to imagine all these sex toys being taken out

From the temp agency, Amalgamated has ordered the exact number of humans it should take to fill this week's orders if we work at top capacity. Lots of retailers use temporary help in peak season, and online ones are no exception. But lots of warehousing and distribution centers like this also use temps year-round. The Bureau of Labor Statistics found that more than 15 percent of pickers, packers, movers, and unloaders are temps. They make \$3 less an hour on average than permanent workers. And they can be "temporary" for years. There are so many temps in this warehouse that the staffing agency has its own office here. Industry consultants describe the temp-staffing business as "very, very busy." "On fire." Maximizing profits means making sure no employee has a slow day, means having only as many employees as are necessary to get the job done, the number of which can be determined and ordered from a huge pool of on-demand labor literally by the day. Often, temp workers have to call in before shifts to see if they'll get work. Sometimes, they're paid piece rate, according to the number of units they fill or unload or move. Always, they can be let

Amalgamated has estimated that we pickers speed-walk an average of 12 miles a day on cold concrete, and the twinge in my legs blurs into the heavy soreness in my feet that complements the pinch in my hips when I crouch to the floor—the pickers' shelving runs from the floor to seven feet high or so—to retrieve an iPad protective case. iPad anti-glare protector. iPad one-hand grip-holder device. Thing that looks like a landline phone handset that plugs into your iPad so you can pretend that rather than talking via iPad you are talking on a phone. And dildos. Really, a staggering number of dildos. At breaks, some of my coworkers

from under a tree and unwrapped. Merry Christmas. I got you this giant black cock you wanted.

call them later to ask, “is that OSHA doesn’t have a standard. Best practices. But no laws.”) So it’s a welcome distraction, really, to imagine all these sex toys being taken out from under a tree and unwrapped. Merry Christmas. I got you this giant black cock you wanted.

At lunch, the most common question, aside from “Which offensive dick-shaped product did you handle the most of today?” is “Why are you here?” like in prison. A guy in his mid-20s says he’s from Chicago, came to this state for a full-time job in the city an hour away from here because “Chicago’s going down.” His other job doesn’t pay especially well, so he’s here—pulling 10.5-hour shifts and commuting two hours a day—anytime he’s not there. One guy says he’s a writer; he applies for grants in his time off from the warehouse. A middle-aged lady near me used to be a bookkeeper. She’s a peak-season hire, worked here last year during Christmas, too. “What do you do the rest of the year?” I ask. “Collect unemployment!” she says, and laughs the sad laugh you laugh when you’re saying something really unfunny. All around us in the break room, mothers frantically call home. “Hi, baby!” you can hear them say; coos to children echo around the walls the moment lunch begins. It’s brave of these women to keep their phones in the break room, where theft is so high—they can’t keep them in their cars if they want to use them during the day, because we aren’t supposed to leave the premises without permission, and they can’t take them onto the warehouse floor, because “nothing but the clothes on your backs” is allowed on the warehouse floor (*anything* on your person that Amalgamated sells can be confiscated—“And what does Amalgamated sell?” they asked us in training. “Everything!”). I suppose that if I were responsible for a child, I would have no choice but to risk leaving my phone in here, too. But the mothers make it quick. “How are you doing?” “Is everything okay?” “Did you eat something?” “I love you!” and then they’re off the phone and eating as fast as the rest of us. Lunch is 29 minutes and 59 seconds—we’ve been reminded of this: “Lunch is *not* 30 minutes and 1 second”—that’s a penalty-point-earning offense—and that includes the time to get through the metal detectors and use the disgustingly overcrowded bathroom—the suggestion board hosts several pleas that someone do something about that smell—and time to stand in line to clock out and back in. So we chew quickly, and are often still chewing as we run back to our stations.



Amazon Macduff Everton/Corbis

The days blend into each other. But it’s near the end of my third day that I get written up. I sent two of some product down the conveyor line when my scanner was only asking for one; the product was boxed in twos, so I should’ve opened the box and separated them, but I didn’t notice because I was in a hurry. With an hour left in the day, I’ve already picked 800 items. Despite moving fast enough to get sloppy, my scanner tells me that means I’m fulfilling only 52 percent of my goal. A supervisor who is a genuinely nice person comes by with a clipboard listing my numbers. Like the rest of the supervisors, she tries to create a friendly work environment and doesn’t want to enforce the policies that make this job so unpleasant. But her hands are tied. She needs this job, too, so she has no choice but to tell me something I have never been told in 19 years of school or at any of some dozen workplaces. “You’re doing really bad,” she says.

I’ll admit that I did start crying a little. Not at work, thankfully, since that’s evidently frowned upon, but later, when I explained to someone over Skype that it hurts, oh, how my body hurts after failing to make my goals despite speed-walking or flat-out jogging and pausing every 20 or 30 seconds to reach on my tiptoes or bend or drop to the floor for 10.5 hours, and isn’t it awful that they fired Brian because he had a baby, and, in fact, when I was hired I signed off on something acknowledging that anyone who leaves without at least a week’s notice—whether because they’re a journalist who will just walk off or because they miss a day for having a baby and are terminated—has their hours paid out not at their hired rate but at the legal minimum. Which in this state, like in lots of states, is about \$7 an hour. Thank God that I (unlike Brian, probably) didn’t need to pay for opting into Amalgamated’s “limited” health insurance program. Because in my 10.5-hour day I’ll make about \$60 after taxes.

“This is America?” my Skype pal asks, because often I’m abroad.

Indeed, and I’m working for a gigantic, immensely profitable company. Or for the staffing company that works for that company, anyway. Which is a nice arrangement, because temporary-staffing agencies keep the stink of unacceptable labor conditions off the companies whose names you know. When temps working at a Walmart warehouse sued for not getting paid for all their hours, and for then getting sent home without pay for complaining, Walmart—not technically their employer—wasn’t named as a defendant. (Though Amazon has been named in a similar suit.) Temporary staffers aren’t legally entitled to decent health care because they are just short-term “contractors” no matter how long they keep the same job. They aren’t entitled to raises, either, and they don’t get vacation and they’d have a hell of a time unionizing and they don’t have the privilege of knowing if they’ll have work on a particular day or for how long they’ll have a job. And that is how you slash prices and deliver products superfast and offer free shipping and still post profits in the millions or billions.

“This really doesn’t have to be this awful,” I shake my head over Skype. But it is. And this job is just about the only game in town, like it is in lots of towns, and eventually will be in more towns, with US internet retail sales projected to grow 10 percent every year to \$279 billion in 2015 and with Amazon, the largest of the online retailers, seeing revenues rise 30 to 40 percent year after year and already having 69 giant warehouses, 17 of which came online in 2011 alone. So butch up, Sally.

“**You look way** too happy,” an Amalgamated supervisor says to me. He has appeared next to me as I work, and in the silence of the vast warehouse, his presence catches me by surprise. His comment, even more so.

“Really?” I ask.

With an hour left in the day, I’ve already picked 800 items. Despite moving fast enough to get sloppy, my scanner tells me that means I’m fulfilling only 52 percent of my goal.

I don't really *feel* happy. By the fourth morning that I drag myself out of bed long before dawn, my self-pity has turned into actual concern. There's a screaming pain running across the back of my shoulders. "You need to take 800 milligrams of Advil a day," a woman in her late 50s or early 60s advised me when we all congregated in the break room before work. When I arrived, I stashed my lunch on a bottom ledge of the cheap metal shelving lining the break room walls, then hesitated before walking away. I cursed myself. I forgot something in the bag, but there was no way to get at it without crouching or bending over, and any extra times of doing that today were times I couldn't really afford. The unhappy-looking guy I always make a point of smiling at told me, as we were hustling to our stations, that this is actually the second time he's worked here: A few weeks back he missed some time for doctors' appointments when his arthritis flared up, and though he had notes for the absences, he was fired; he had to start the application process over again, which cost him an extra week and a half of work. "Zoom zoom! Pick it up! Pickers' pace, guys!" we were prodded this morning. Since we already felt like we were moving pretty fast, I'm quite dispirited, in fact.

"Really?" I ask.

"Well," the supervisor qualifies. "Just everybody else is usually really sad or mad by the time they've been working here this long."

It's my 28th hour as an employee.

I probably look happier than I should because I have the extreme luxury of not giving a shit about keeping this job. Nevertheless, I'm tearing around my assigned sector hard enough to keep myself consistently light-headed and a little out of breath. I'm working in books today. "Oh," I smiled to myself when I reached the paper-packed shelves. I love being around books.

A hot spark shoots between my hand and the metal shelving, striking enough to make my body learn to fear it.

Picking books for Amalgamated has a disadvantage over picking dildos or baby food or Barbies, however, in that the shelving numbers don't always line up. When my scanner tells me the book I need is on the lowest level in section 28 of a row, section 28 of the eye-level shelf of that row may or may not line up with section 28 of the lowest level. So when I spot eye-level section 28 and squat or kneel on the floor, the section 28 I'm looking for might be five feet to my right or left. Which means I have to stand up and crouch back down again to get there, greatly increasing the number of times I need to stand and crouch/kneel in a day. Or I can crawl. Usually, I crawl. A coworker is choosing the crouch/kneel option. "This gets so tiring after a while," he says when we pass each other. He's 20. It's 9:07 a.m.

There are other disadvantages to working in books. In the summer, it's the heat. Lots of the volumes are stored on the second and third floors of this immense cement box; the job descriptions we had to sign off on acknowledged that temperatures can be as low as 60 and higher than 95 degrees, and higher floors tend to be hotter. "They had to get fans because in the summer people were dying in here," one of the supervisors tells us. The fans still blow now even though I'm wearing five shirts. "If you think it's cold in *here*," one of my coworkers told me when she saw me rubbing my arms for warmth one morning, "just hope we don't have a fire drill." They evacuated everyone for one recently, and lots of the fast-moving employees had stripped down to T-shirts. They stood outside, masses of them, shivering for an hour as snow fell on their bare arms.



Netflix Matthew J. Lee/Boston Globe/Getty Images

In the books sector, in the cold, in the winter dryness, made worse by the fans and all the paper, I jet across the floor in my rubber-soled Adidas, pant legs whooshing against each other, 30 seconds according to my scanner to take 35 steps to get to the right section and row and bin and level and reach for *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and "FUCK!" A hot spark shoots between my hand and the metal shelving. It's not the light static-electric prick I would terrorize my sister with when we got bored in carpeted department stores, but a solid shock, striking enough to make my body learn to fear it. I start inadvertently hesitating every time I approach my target. One of my coworkers races up to a shelving unit and leans in with the top of his body first; his head touches the metal, and the shock knocks him back. "Be careful of your head," he says to me. In the first two hours of my day, I pick 300 items. The majority of them zap me painfully.

"Please tell me you have suggestions for dealing with the static electricity," I say to a person in charge when the morning break comes. This conversation is going to cost me a couple of my precious few minutes to eat/drink/pee, but I've started to get paranoid that maybe it's not good for my body to exchange an electric charge with metal several hundred times in one day.

"You'll feel carpal tunnel start to set in," one of the supervisors told me, "so you'll want to change hands."

"Oh, are you workin' in books?"

"Yeah."

"No. Sorry." She means this. I feel bad for the supervisors who are trying their damndest to help us succeed and not be miserable. "They've done everything they can"—"they" are not aware, it would appear, that anti-static coating and matting exist—to ground things up there but there's nothing you can do."

I produce a deep frown. But even if she did have suggestions, I probably wouldn't have time to implement them. One suggestion for minimizing work-related pain and strain is to get a stepladder to retrieve any items on shelves above your head rather than getting up on your toes and overreaching. But grabbing one of the stepladders stashed few and far between among the rows of merchandise takes time. Another is to alternate the hand you use to hold and wield your cumbersome scanner. "You'll feel carpal tunnel start to set in," one of the supervisors told me, "so you'll want to change hands." But that, too, he admitted, costs time, since you have to hit the bar code at just the right angle for it to scan, and your dominant hand is way more likely to nail it the first time. Time is not a thing I have to spare. I'm still only at 57 percent of my goal. It's been 10 years since I was a mover and packer for a moving company, and only slightly less since I worked ridiculously long hours as a waitress and housecleaner. My back and knees were younger then, but I'm only 21 and feel pretty confident that if I were doing those jobs again I'd still wake up with

...obviously long hours as a matter and how much my back and knees were younger then, but I'm only 31 and feel pretty confident that if I were doing those jobs again I could make up that soreness like a person who'd worked out too much, not the soreness of a person whose body was staging a revolt. I can break into goal-meeting suicide pace for short bouts, sure, but I can't keep it up for 10.5 hours.

"Do not say that," one of the workampers tells me at break. Workampers are people who drive RVs around the country, from temporary job to temporary job, docking in trailer camps. "We're retired but we can't..." another explains to me about himself and his wife, shrugging, "make it. And there's no jobs, so we go where the jobs are."

Amalgamated advertises positions on websites workampers frequent. In this warehouse alone, there are hundreds of them.

"Never say that you can't do it," the first workamper emphasizes. "When they ask you why you aren't reaching your goals—"

"Say, 'It's because they're totally unreasonable?'" I suggest.

"These decisions are made at a business level and are based on cost," an industry analyst says. "I never, ever thought about what they're like and how they treat people. Fulfillment centers want to keep clients blissfully ignorant of their conditions."

do a good job. Even some of the employees who are total failures are still trying really hard. "I heard you're doing good," one of the ladies in my training group says to me. Her eyebrows are heavy with stress. I am still hitting less than 60 percent of my target. Still, that's better than she's doing. "Congratulations," she says, and smiles sadly.

"Say you'll do better, even if you know you can't," she continues, ignoring me. "Say you'll try harder, even if the truth is that you're trying your absolute hardest right now, no matter how many times they tell you you're not doing good enough."

There *are* people who make the goals. One of the trainers does. She works here all year, not just during Christmas. "I hated picking for the first month," she told me sympathetically the other day. "Then you just get used to it." She's one of many hardcore workers here, a labor pool studded with dedicated and solid employees. One of the permanent employees has tried to encourage me by explaining that he *always* makes his goals, and sometimes makes 120 percent of them. When I ask him if that isn't totally exhausting, he says, "Oh yeah. You're gonna be crying for your mommy when today's over." When I ask him if there's any sort of incentive for his overperformance, if he's rewarded in any way, he says occasionally Amalgamated enters him in drawings for company gift cards. For \$15 or \$20. He shrugs when he admits the size of the bonus. "These days you need it." Anyway, he says, he thinks it's important to have a good attitude and try to



Zappos Brent Humphreys/Redux

We will be fired if we say we just can't or won't get better, the workamper tells me. But so long as I resign myself to hearing how inadequate I am on a regular basis, I can keep this job. "Do you think this job has to be this terrible?" I ask the workamper.

"Oh, no," she says, and makes a face at me like I've asked a stupid question, which I have. As if Amalgamated couldn't bear to lose a fraction of a percent of profits by employing a few more than the absolute minimum of bodies they have to, or by storing the merchandise at halfway ergonomic heights and angles. But that would cost space, and space costs money, and money is not a thing customers could possibly be expected to hand over for this service without huffily taking their business elsewhere. Charging for shipping does cause high abandonment rates of online orders, though it's not clear whether people wouldn't pay a few bucks for shipping, or a bit more for the products, if they were guaranteed that no low-income workers would be tortured or exploited in the handling of their purchases.

"The first step is awareness," an e-commerce specialist will tell me later. There have been trickles of information leaking out of the Internet Order Fulfillment Industrial Complex: an investigation by the Allentown, Pennsylvania, *Morning Call* in which Amazon workers complained of fainting in stifling heat, being disciplined for getting heat exhaustion, and otherwise being "treated like a piece of crap"; a workampers' blog picked up by *Gizmodo*; a *Huffington Post* exposé about the lasting physical damage and wild economic instability temporary warehouse staffers suffer. And workers have filed lawsuits against online retailers, their logistics companies, and their temp agencies over off-the-clock work and other compensation issues, as well as at least one that details working conditions that are all too similar. (That case has been dismissed but is on appeal.) Still, most people really don't know how most internet goods get to them. The e-commerce specialist didn't even know, and she was in charge of choosing the 3PL for her midsize online-retail company. "These decisions are made at a business level and are based on cost," she says. "I never, ever thought about what they're like and how they treat people. Fulfillment centers want to keep clients blissfully ignorant of their conditions." If you called major clothing retailers, she ventured, and asked them "what it was like at the warehouse that ships their sweaters, no one at company headquarters would have any fucking clue."

Further, she said, now that I mentioned it, she has no idea how to go about getting any information on the conditions at the 3PL she herself hired. Nor how to find a responsible one. "A standard has to be created. Like fair trade or organic certification, where social good is built into the cost. There is a segment of the population"—like the consumers of her company's higher-end product, she felt—"that cares and will pay for it."

There's no time off on Election Day. "What

If they are aware how inhumane the reality is. But awareness has a long way to go, and logistics doesn't just mean online retail; food packagers and processors, medical suppliers, and factories use mega-3PLs as well. And a whole lot of other industries—hotels, call centers—take advantage of the price controls and plausible deniability that temporary staffing offers.

if I want to vote?" I ask a supervisor. "I think you should!" he says. "But if I leave I'll get fired," I say. To which he makes a sad face before saying, "Yeah."

"Maybe awareness will lead to better working conditions," says Vinod Singhal, a professor of operations management at Georgia Tech. "But..." Given the state of the economy, he isn't optimistic.

This is the kind of resignation many of my coworkers have been forced to accept. At the end of break, the workamper and I are starting to fast-walk back to our stations. A guy who's been listening to our conversation butts in. "They can take you for everything you've got," he says. "They know it's your last resort."

At today's pickers' meeting, we are reminded that customers are waiting. We *cannot* move at a "comfortable pace," because if we are comfortable, we will never make our numbers, and customers are not willing to wait. And it's Christmastime. We got 2.7 million orders this week. People need—*need*—these items and they need them right now. So even if you've worked here long enough to be granted time off, you are not allowed to use it until the holidays are over. (And also forget about Election Day, which is today. "What if I want to vote?" I ask a supervisor. "I think you should!" he says. "But if I leave I'll get fired," I say. To which he makes a sad face before saying, "Yeah.") No time off includes those of you who are scheduled to work Thanksgiving. There are two Amalgamated-catered Thanksgiving dinners offered to employees next week, but you can only go to one of them. If you attend one, your employee badge will be branded with a nonremovable sticker so that you cannot also attempt to eat at the other. Anyway, good luck, everybody. Everybody back to work. Quickly!

Speed-walking back to the electro-trauma of the books sector, I wince when I unintentionally imagine the types of Christmas lore that will prevail around my future household. I feel genuinely sorry for any child I might have who ever asks me for anything for Christmas, only to be informed that every time a "Place Order" button rings, a poor person takes four Advil and gets told they suck at their job.

I suppose this is what they were talking about in the radio ad I heard on the way to work, the one that was paid for by a coalition of local businesses, gently begging citizens to buy from them instead of off the internet and warning about the importance of supporting local shops. But if my coworker Brian wants to feed his new baby any of these 24-packs of Plum Organics Apple & Carrot baby food I've been picking, he should probably buy them from Amazon, where they cost only \$31.16. In my locally owned grocery store, that's \$47.76 worth of sustenance. Even if he finds the time to get in the car to go buy it at a brick-and-mortar Target, where it'd be less convenient but cost about the same as on Amazon, that'd be before sales tax, which physical stores, unlike Amazon, are legally required to charge to help pay for the roads on which Brian's truck, and more to the point Amazon's trucks, drive.

Back in books, I take a sharp shock to my right hand when I grab the book the scanner cramping my left hand demands me to and make some self-righteous promises to myself about continuing to buy food at my more-expensive grocery store, because I can. Because I'm not actually a person who makes \$7.25 an hour, not anymore, not one of the 1 in 3 Americans who is now poor or "near poor." For the moment, I'm just playing one.

"Lucky girl," I whisper to myself at the tail of a deep breath, as soon as fresh winter air hits my lungs. It's only lunchtime, but I've breached the warehouse doors without permission. I've picked 500 items this morning, and don't want to get shocked anymore, or hear from the guy with the clipboard what a total disappointment I am. "Lucky girl, lucky girl, lucky girl," I repeat on my way to my car. I told the lady from my training group who's so stressed about her poor performance to tell our supervisor not to look for me—and she grabbed my arm as I turned to leave, looking even more worried than usual, asking if I was sure I knew what I was doing. I don't want our supervisor to waste any time; he's got goals to make, too. He won't miss me, and nobody else will, either. The temp agency is certainly as full of applicants as it was when I went to ask for a job.

"Just look around in here if you wanna see how bad it is out there," one of the associates at the temp office said to me, unprompted, when I got hired. It's the first time anyone has ever tried to comfort me *because* I got a job, because he knew, and everyone in this industry that's growing wildfire fast knows, and accepts, that its model by design is mean. He offered me the same kind of solidarity the workers inside the warehouse try to provide each other at every break: *Why are you here? What happened that you have to let people treat you like this?* "We're all in the same boat," he said, after shaking my hand to welcome me aboard. "It's a *really* big boat."

This story ran in the March/April 2012 issue of Mother Jones, under the headline "Shelf Lives."

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