

Stock-owning warehouse worker asking shareholders to make Amazon slow down

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Daniel Olayiwola didn't feel Amazon was listening to his concerns as an employee, so he decided to raise his voice as a shareholder.

After spending more than four years working as a picker at Amazon warehouses in Texas and Florida, where he was responsible for gathering

the items needed to fill orders, Olayiwola started making videos to document the working conditions at Amazon's fulfillment centers, and call on the company to increase pay and decrease the pace of work.

Earlier this year, he bought stock in his employer, opening the door to another way to put pressure on the company and hoping to gain the support of other Amazon investors.

Ahead of the company's annual shareholder meeting May 25, he introduced a proposal that asks Amazon to end the quota system dictating how many items an employee must pick, pack or stow each shift. During the meeting, Amazon shareholders will vote for or against the resolution.

"Whether you're a driver, a picker, a stower, when you work for Amazon, you put your health and safety on the line every single shift," Olayiwola wrote in the proposal. "When you're rushing to make rate or when you're worried that pausing to catch your breath could lose you your job, you're forced to prioritize speed over safety."

Amazon often points to internal data that shows its lost time incident rate—a measure of the number of injuries that resulted in time off work—improved 43% from 2019 to 2020.

But a recent analysis from the Strategic Organizing Center, a coalition of labor unions, found injury rates at Amazon warehouses increased 20% over the last year, according to data the company submitted to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Olayiwola, 28, said he has gone on [medical leave](#) "multiple times," and has had to go to [physical therapy](#) during his time as an Amazon employee. The pace of work exacerbated shin injuries from his time serving as a medic in the U.S. Army.

He's expected to pick 350-400 items per hour, for 10-hour shifts.

"At the rate we're expected to work and stand for 40 hours a week, it's just way too much for some people," he said in an interview. "Most people continue to limp through work no matter what."

The proposal asks Amazon to change its practices by the end of August. The change would apply to all Amazon employees, including warehouse workers, delivery drivers through the company's Delivery Service Partners program and other third-party contractor employees.

Olayiwola is tapping into a form of activism that's seeing increased use and increased success: putting pressure on the company through its stockholders.

Large companies in the United States saw a 30% increase in shareholder activist campaigns in the first half of 2021 compared with 2020, according to an analysis from the law firm Shearman & Sterling. COVID-19 briefly took the momentum out of the activism swell but analysts expect "renewed vigor" to continue this year.

In the first half of 2021, 20% of the social and political proposals introduced received majority shareholder support, the analysis found. That's up from 10% in 2020 and 7% in 2019.

Bianca Agustin, the corporate accountability director at the activist group United for Respect, estimates Amazon shareholders will vote on 10 proposals aimed at protecting workers and communities at the company's meeting next month. Olayiwola worked with United for Respect to craft the language of his proposal.

Aiming to increase workers' influence as decisions are made, one proposal asks Amazon to include hourly employees in the initial list of

candidates for new board nominees. Another requests an audit of the working conditions warehouse workers face, while another asks for a report on whether Amazon's health and safety practices give rise to racial and gender disparities in workplace injury rates. That report would include injury rates for all warehouse workers, broken down by race, gender and ethnicity.

"For more than a decade, Amazon workers and communities have been calling for an end to the dangerous surveillance technology and unsafe working conditions in warehouses across the country," Agustin said at a news conference Wednesday. "This year, Amazon shareholders are sounding the alarm as well."

Amazon's board of directors is recommending shareholders vote against those proposals, arguing the company is already "transparent" about its commitment to improving worker safety and that it has processes in place to include its employees in decision-making.

The board can't yet comment on Olayiwola's efforts because it falls into a different category of proposals under a complicated web of rules from the Securities and Exchange Commission.

In defense of its quota system, Amazon wrote in a safety report this year that its process prioritizes safe work performance and accounts for daily changes to the business.

"We believe individual performance metrics are a key business tool for ensuring high-quality work, operational efficiency and fairness in employee engagement," the report reads. "We assess performance based on safe and achievable expectations, accounting for tenure, peer performance and adherence to safe work practices."

Olayiwola started at Amazon after his time in the military and time spent

working as an emergency medical technician. He didn't expect to go into the warehouse industry but he needed a job and Amazon was hiring. When he moved from Florida to Texas, it was easy to find work at an Amazon warehouse once again.

Now, he's reached the top pay scale—making \$17.75 an hour—and has watched as many of his co-workers either chose to leave the company in pursuit of a job that comes with less physical stress or are fired for not being able to keep pace with the quotas Amazon has set.

He's hoping to appeal to the business sense of Amazon's shareholders, writing in his proposal that "there are serious questions whether current practices are sustainable over the long-term" and, consequently, whether those practices contribute to long-term shareholder value.

"There's a lot of ways you can try to speak to Amazon but most of them end up in retaliation," Olayiwola said. "But speaking as a shareholder, you can't be ignored."

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