

As more workers test positive for COVID-19, Amazon ignores demands to close warehouses

By Tom Carter
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At least three workers at Amazon's SDF-9 warehouse in Shepherdsville, Kentucky tested positive for the coronavirus on Monday, leading to the two-day closure of the warehouse. The workers tested positive "at the site," according to a voicemail message to employees, and workers who were in "close contact" with those who fell victim to the illness have been instructed to "self-quarantine."

At the same time, management has stated its intention to re-open the warehouse in 48 hours. Since any number of workers could be asymptomatic and contagious after having come into contact with the virus, the refusal to quarantine the entire workforce for two weeks amounts to gambling with workers' lives. This action is all the more egregious given that the Shepherdsville facility is mostly dedicated to processing returns, not the distribution of goods.

The company's statement presented the two-day closure as motivated by concern for the health of workers. "Out of an abundance of caution," Amazon's statement read, "and in addition to our enhanced daily deep cleaning, we are temporarily closing the Shepherdsville, Ky., site for additional sanitization."

Amazon worker Jennifer Bohannon told Louisville television station WDRB that she was "appalled and disappointed" at plans to reopen the warehouse in only two days. "The concern is, how many are walking around (the building) now, asymptomatic?"

Yesterday, a worker at an Amazon warehouse in Florida tested positive for coronavirus. The worker had been working until March 18 before falling ill, and just received the results of the test. The warehouse appears as of this writing to remain open, with only those workers believed to have been in "close contact" with the victim remanded to two weeks of self-quarantine.

Also yesterday, an Amazon worker at a Brownstown

sort center in Michigan tested positive. The victim had been working at the facility until March 16. Five other workers have been quarantined.

On Wednesday of last week, a worker tested positive at an Amazon facility in Queens, New York City, leading to an angry confrontation with workers that was recorded on video. "We can see that there's an absolute disregard for our lives," declared one worker to a management representative.

Outrage among workers to management's barebones or non-existent safety measures is mounting at Amazon and across broad sections of industry. One index of popular anger is the hashtag #NotDying4WallStreet, which had been tweeted more than a hundred thousand times as of yesterday morning and was the third most popular hashtag in the United States.

Amazon's safety measures include "requiring employees to stay home and seek medical attention if they are feeling unwell" and "moving chairs and spreading out tables in breakrooms." In addition, workers are being chastised to "sanitize and clean their work stations and vehicles at the start and end of every shift with disinfectant/cleaning wipes," to wash their hands "for at least 20 seconds," and to defer "non-essential travel."

These patronizing, low-cost measures are consistent with Amazon's history of conduct towards injured workers. Prior to the pandemic, workers who suffered significant injuries in the warehouse were told to go to AmCare, Amazon's in-house medical provider, where they were given painkillers or instructed to sit on a heating pad.

Catastrophic back injury? "Sit on this heating pad for 15 minutes." Coronavirus? "Here are some cleaning wipes, wash your hands." That is the corporate message.

With significant sections of Amazon workers compelled to stay at home as a result of the closure of schools, or otherwise refusing to risk their lives in the context of the pandemic, Amazon has announced a \$2 per hour raise and the hiring of 100,000 additional workers. This amounts to a de facto furloughing of a wide swath of the existing workforce without pay.

One factor dramatically aggravating the risk to workers is the absence of systematic and universal testing. Without the ability to test for the presence of the virus among workers who may have contracted the virus but are not displaying symptoms, each work shift in an Amazon warehouse is a lethal game of chance.

While the coronavirus is invisible to the naked eye, the risks are very real. There were 750,000 Amazon employees in 2019, and now an additional 100,000 are in the process of being hired. If half of those workers were ultimately infected with the virus, tens of thousands of Amazon workers could die.

Everywhere around the world, the corporations continue to demand that workers labor in infected factories, warehouses and other workplaces despite the dire threat to their health. This was only stopped when workers took matters into their own hands and launched a wave of wildcat strikes in US and European auto factories and other industries, forcing the closure of unsafe workplaces. Amazon workers should form rank-and-file committees to prepare similar collective action.

Amazon workers should demand the closure of all warehouses until teams of sanitary workers, overseen by health professionals, thoroughly clean the operations, workers are fitted with the most up-to-date personal protection equipment and a regime of free testing for all workers is put in place. In the meantime, workers should be paid in full for any lost time.

Amazon workers have made it clear they do not object to delivering masks, medical equipment, and other critical goods during the pandemic. Workers bravely venturing out of their homes to support the efforts to combat the pandemic deserve to be honored and guarded with the highest level of protection that modern science and medicine can provide.

But Amazon's billionaire CEO Jeff Bezos insists that workers must "wait their turn" for masks and other protective gear. But there is plenty of money available for vastly greater levels of protection for Amazon

workers. *The Motley Fool*, a financial and investment services company, described Amazon yesterday as "a top stock to buy during the coronavirus sell-off." The article continued: "Add in the company's rock-solid balance sheet – with more than \$55 billion in cash and marketable securities, and just \$23 billion in long-term debt – and you have a host of reasons to buy Amazon before the market comes to its senses."

In other words, management of the trillion-dollar conglomerate sits on a cash hoard valued in the tens of billions, and the company is viewed an excellent profit-making vehicle for the billionaire speculators and hedge funds looking for a way to get richer during the global disaster.

Bezos himself, whose current wealth totals around \$131 billion, purchased a new Beverly Hills mansion last month at a price of \$165 million. Known as the Warner Estate, this purchase in the midst of the pandemic set a new record in the state of California for the most amount of money ever paid for a home.

Amazon's conduct throughout the pandemic underscores the necessity of transforming this key division of the global logistics infrastructure into a publicly controlled enterprise. The critical needs of the vast majority of the human population must take priority over the whims and prerogatives of the billionaires. Under democratic control, Amazon's vast logistical network and resources can be turned into a powerful weapon in the fight against the pandemic.

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