

# Quarantined worker in Amazon's "meat grinder" in Texas denied sick pay, unable to get tested for COVID-19

By Tom Carter  
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An Amazon worker at the DFW7 warehouse in the Dallas-Fort Worth area of Texas who is under quarantine has yet to receive sick pay, in spite of assurances to the contrary from the online retailer. Even though Jo, whose real name is being withheld in this article, tells the *World Socialist Web Site* that she is currently under doctor's orders to "self-quarantine" and has a doctor's note diagnosing her with "severe bronchitis and possible COVID-19," she has yet to be tested, and doctors tell her there are none available in her area.

The WSWS has separately received a tip, based on internal emails that were circulated among area managers, that there may already be four suspected coronavirus cases at DFW7, the "meat grinder" which saw 567 injuries in a two-year period, which we initially exposed in a 2018 interview with well-known whistleblower and former Amazon worker Shannon Allen. To Jo's knowledge, none of the other workers at her warehouse have been told about her condition.

One worker at DFW7 wrote an anonymous message on the VOA ("voice of associate") board, which workers use to communicate with management, asking whether a rumor was true that three workers had already fallen ill. As of Jo's last day in the warehouse, management had not responded to that message.

It is widely believed among Amazon warehouse workers that management is concealing the number of possible infections and downplaying the risk in order to keep workers on the job. Walkouts of Amazon workers have already taken place in New York, Illinois and Michigan. In many workplaces, the discovery by workers of a diagnosed case of COVID-19 has been explosive.

On March 21, Amazon CEO and world's richest person Jeff Bezos sent a patronizing letter to Amazon worker declaring his "gratitude" for their continuing to work during the pandemic, while informing them that they would not receive basic safety equipment, such as masks, for the foreseeable future.

The online retail giant's real attitude has been expressed, not only in Jo's inability to get sick leave, but in the ruthless treatment of workers who led walkouts to protest the company's endangerment of workers' health.

Until all suspected cases can be tested and a thorough cleaning of the warehouse is carried out, Amazon workers should demand that DFW7 and other facilities be immediately closed. Amazon workers, together with workers throughout the world, must insist

that the overriding priority must be the basic health and safety of the working class, not the selfish profiteering of the ruling class. The fight for a rational, humane response to the pandemic requires a fight against the principal obstacle to such a course: the capitalist profit system.

On March 28, Jo remembers feeling unusually tired when she set out for work. By the time she arrived in the parking lot of the Amazon warehouse for the start of her 6:00 p.m. shift, she had developed a severe headache and shortness of breath, and began to feel very sick.

She did not have a thermometer with her, so "the first thing I did was I went to AmCare," Jo says. "So I went in there and requested my temperature. And that's when I was told about the six-foot rule"—that is, that Amcare could not take her temperature because it would violate social distancing measures.

Taken aback by this Kafkaesque response from AmCare, she confronted her supervisor, who was walking past. He directed her to speak with human resources. She walked into the human resources office, where she was given numbers to call. She was given the number of a doctor's office to call and was also told to call the company medical advice line.

Jo returned to Amazon's parking lot, and a doctor evaluated her over the phone while she sat in her car. At that time, the doctor indicated that the most likely cause of her symptoms was her severe chronic bronchitis.

Jo, who has worked for Amazon for two years, developed chronic bronchitis during a previous "peak" period, which is a period of extreme stress and high activity in the warehouse. As a result, Jo now needs to carry an inhaler. The warehouse is very dusty, she explained, and the fans are rarely if ever cleaned. "They are on 24/7, and the business is open 24/7."

Jo had previously sparred with management over its refusal to let her bring her inhaler to her station. Instead, management instructed her to stow it in a far corner of the warehouse or in her car, where it would do her little good in an emergency.

Jo was also injured on the job In June 2019, when she broke her wrist and damaged a nerve in her thumb while working as a stower. Like Shannon Allen and many other workers, she received the run-around when applying for workers' compensation after her injury. After she was finally able to see a doctor, she was told that the nerve damage in her thumb had become permanent.

Her history with bronchitis, the doctor told Jo, meant she had an elevated risk if she contracted the coronavirus. Jo applied for a leave of absence immediately, using her cellphone, and submitted all of the paperwork the same day.

She had recently switched insurance, and her previous doctor's office would not take her new insurance, adding an additional level of frustration to her journey through the insurance and corporate bureaucracy. Jo remembers feeling lost and in shock. "I felt like nobody could help me. There was one person telling me to talk to someone else, then another person telling me to talk to someone else. I was in the facility for an hour, talking to different people. And I went in there not feeling good."

Before developing symptoms, Jo did not fully realize how the coronavirus was a serious danger for someone living in her corner of Texas. "When you work the p.m. shift, you miss the news," she said. "I didn't even realize it was spreading at such a rate. You hear Trump saying it's bogus, it's bogus, it's a hoax, it's the flu. If that's all you hear, that's all you believe. Then all of a sudden there is blue tape telling you where you can stand, and tables are spread out and half the tables are gone."

Then she developed symptoms. "It's scary."

On March 29, the day after she developed symptoms, a second doctor evaluated Jo over the phone and recommended that she be granted a two-day leave of absence while her condition continued to be monitored.

On April 3, a third doctor evaluated her and diagnosed her with "severe bronchitis and possible COVID-19." The doctor wrote a letter to Amazon, stating that Jo's condition "impairs [her] ability to work and/or is highly contagious," recommending that she "self-quarantine" for two weeks before returning to work.

For Jo, the phrase "possible COVID-19" in the doctor's note was alarming. Given the danger, especially in light of her severe chronic bronchitis, she immediately asked to be tested for the coronavirus. But she was told: "There are no tests." The available tests in her area have all been used, the doctor said.

The doctor's efforts to secure a test for her were unsuccessful. She was also told that when more tests became available, they will likely be given to the patients who are already in the hospital with the most extreme symptoms.

As of this writing, Jo is still on a waitlist and has still not been tested. The doctor prescribed a course of treatment with the assumption that Jo has the coronavirus. A neighbor has been helping her with groceries and errands. "Since I'm still on leave I can't apply for unemployment," Jo says. "If it wasn't for my neighbor I don't know what I'd do."

The company, Jo says, distributed a glossy magazine to employees stating reassuringly that "Amazon employees diagnosed with COVID-19 or placed into quarantine will receive up to two weeks of additional paid time off, so they can get healthy without worrying about lost income [emphasis added]."

But Amazon has thus far failed to provide Jo with sick pay. Despite being told that she would receive a response by Friday, April 3, Jo has thus far not been able to obtain any response from management about her sick pay.

"This is for the ones that are working there now," Jo says. "Think about this \$2 raise you are getting. My health savings

account is wiped out. I was trying to save up to go get my dental work. I had to pay for the doctor's appointments out of my own pocket. I had to pay over \$400 and I'm still not diagnosed, and I still don't know if I have this virus or not. My next doctor's appointment on Tuesday is going to be another \$75, and if there is any medication prescribed that will be more."

The two-dollar raise, Jo says, is totally out of proportion to the scale of the danger workers confront and the consequences they will face if they fall ill. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, says Jo, "does not care about his employees. I don't even know if I get a check for sick pay after working there two years. And this is just what was already promised to me."

The most important thing for Jo is the health and well-being of other workers at DFW7 and their families. At first, she says, she was concerned about herself. She has chronic bronchitis, and the coronavirus is a very serious threat to her health. She has been struggling with the symptoms, coughing and feeling sore, and taking strong medications that make her feel "shaky and old." In addition, the bills are piling up, her health care savings are wiped out, and it is still uncertain whether she will receive her promised sick pay. "The landlady already put a notice on my door that I did not pay rent."

However, what keeps Jo up at night is the thought of other workers being potentially infected. "I think about all the people I was in contact with. Many live at home with their elderly parents. Did they take it home? Did I infect them? Since I haven't been diagnosed I don't really know and I don't want to frighten them. But don't they have a right to know they could have been contaminated?"

"They are sitting there thinking our facility has no cases," Jo said, referring to her coworkers. "There are no confirmed cases because they don't test you. They only test you when you are in the hospital and you already have it bad. I feel guilty not knowing, and I feel guilty about all of them."

"They are not doing this right," she said, referring to management at her warehouse. "They are not communicating at all."

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