

# Grocery worker dies from COVID-19 infection in suburban Maryland

By Nick Barrickman  
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On Sunday, the COVID-19 pandemic claimed the life of 27-year-old Leilani Jordan, an employee of the Giant Food Stores supermarket chain from Largo, Maryland.

Jordan had worked for Giant for six years. She was hired as a part of the grocery chain's disability program. "She just loved her little job," said a tearful Zenobia Shepherd, Jordan's mother, to a local CBS affiliate. "She said nobody was showing up to work. She said, 'Mommy, I'm going to go to work. I'm going to still go to work. I want to help.'"

Jordan first informed her job that she was diagnosed with COVID-19 on March 28. Her symptoms quickly became more pronounced. Her mother tearfully explained that by the time she brought her daughter to the Walter Reed Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, "she fell. She collapsed in the parking lot. When they got her, she had a 104-degree fever. They put her in isolation. She called me and said, 'Mommy, I can barely breathe.'

"She was my butterfly. I know she's in heaven and she's there welcoming everybody."

As the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps through the United States, workers in industries deemed "essential," such as grocery, are increasingly being exposed to the killer virus at extremely high rates.

Jordan's tragic and preventable death is one of many in the supermarket and grocery stores industry. Just yesterday, a worker at a Trader Joe's location in Scarsdale, New York, was pronounced dead from complications stemming from COVID-19. In Evergreen Park, Illinois, two Walmart employees, Wando Evans, 51, and Phillip Thomas, 48, died late last month from the disease. The family of Evans has filed a wrongful death lawsuit against the Arkansas-based retailer, accusing the company of failing to observe social distancing and other policies

advised by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The Centers for Disease Control has designated Walmart stores as 'high-volume retailers,' making them responsible for taking additional precautions to protect employees and customers from the spread of COVID-19," said Evans family attorney Tony Kalogerakos to Reuters.

In some cases, thousands of people pass through a grocery store on any given day.

According to a 2017 study cited by *USA Today*, grocery carts and other supermarket surfaces contain "hundreds of times more colony-forming units of bacteria per square inch 'than surfaces in your bathroom.'" The article noted that the study was conducted under "normal" conditions "with no pandemic and no panic buying for toilet paper and bread."

While officials continue to call on people to stay at home and abide by social distancing measures, workers tasked with maintaining and restocking supplies in grocery stores and supermarkets must remain on the job. In fact, last month, Walmart, the largest retail chain in America, announced that it would be expanding its workforce by 150,000 employees through May. According to the *New York Times*, "the company's goal is to place workers in jobs within 24 hours."

Only a few states have classified grocery workers as emergency workers, despite their hazardous work conditions and safety.

"Currently, I am working over my contractual limit. They are employing me like a full-time worker during this pandemic," a Giant Food Store employee said to the *World Socialist Web Site*. "I'm a student, also, and Giant isn't giving people like me time to do

schoolwork. I actually may have to drop out because co-workers keep calling in sick and they need me longer hours,” they said.

Grocery store workers around the country have rightly joined the chorus of working-class voices demanding proper protective gear and sanitation equipment while on the job.

“We have ‘hand sanitizer’ at work, only I wouldn’t really call it that. It’s rubbing alcohol in a spray bottle. It is really bad for your hands,” one Giant Food employee commented. “It isn’t as bad as the stuff they use to wipe down the belts [in the checkout line]. That leaves a funny chemical smell. Customers have complained about it.”

A Whole Foods employee from Northern Virginia told the WSWS that “we work long hours, with little if any pay raise. Safety equipment is wholly inadequate. At the most we get one mask, which we have to re-use.”

Another service worker from Texas explained the ineffectiveness of the “safety precautions” being employed by various retail industries. “Adding these ‘sneeze guards’ would do little more for workers than providing them with gloves and a mask. They say that it would protect someone from a sneeze or cough as if either of those were a direct stream ejecting out of someone’s nostrils or mouth, instead of something more like a cloud that can stay suspended in air for 10 minutes.”

He continued, “I think the real issue is that half-assed measures like putting up a piece of Plexiglas will be used as another excuse to force people back to work. It will be said that proper measures are in place to protect workers and that they should return to the job. I’ve literally been told that we’re still working because corporate trusts that we’re sanitizing as we should. The underlying implication is that it’s our fault if we get sick.”

Another Giant worker commented on the role their union has played throughout the crisis: “The union [the United Food and Commercial Workers] doesn’t protect us. ... It sent us a survey asking us if we had the supplies we needed and asked us to select from a list of policies *two* things we would like to have. These options included emergency pay, sick leave, expanded health care coverage, more gloves, more hand sanitizers, among other things. I’m like, ‘we’re f-----

dying out here, why would you limit us to two options?’”

The worker explained that at her location, customers were bringing employees protective gear and sanitation equipment when the union failed to do so. “A customer actually bought me a better-working mask than the one the store provided me,” he said. “I told another customer that I was receiving a 10 percent hazard pay raise, they gave me a \$20 tip, saying ‘10 percent is not enough.’”

One Giant worker shared with the WSWS her message to all workers affected by COVID-19: “We need to stop sacrificing our health, essential workers in states with four- or five-figure death rates should not work at all. We should be paid the same as essential workers.”

She continued, “It’s time to take action. We need a general strike. They want to let workers die.” She added, “instead of money for bankers, we should have money for workers. [Leilani Jordan] did not die in vain.”

*The Socialist Equality Party wants to hear from you. How is the COVID-19 crisis affecting you and your workplace? Get in touch with us here to tell your story.*

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