

“They have our lives in their hands”

Amazon concealed COVID-19 case at Pennsylvania warehouse

By Samuel Davidson and Kayla Costa
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According to reports by Amazon workers, management at an Amazon warehouse in the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania area did not inform employees that one of their coworkers called in sick with symptoms of COVID-19 and then tested positive. On April 14, workers were informed that a worker who last worked on April 6 was infected with COVID-19, having worked a little over a week without any information or extra precautions.

The Harrisburg case was confirmed on the same day that company officials reported the first death of an Amazon warehouse employee in California two weeks earlier, on March 31. Workers at United Parcel Service (UPS) and the US Postal Service (USPS) have reported similar situations in which management kept workers on the job without informing them of confirmed cases and without providing them with adequate protections.

A worker at the Harrisburg facility, who will be referred to as Michael due to his fears of retaliation, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “There is a confirmed case at my job, and we all found out way after the fact, with no closure.”

Michael said employees started noticing that the company was doing extra cleaning around the warehouse, but that they had not been told why. “They were having employees do it too. I have not been asked yet and would probably refuse.”

Workers received a text message late Tuesday afternoon telling them that there was a confirmed case of COVID-19 at their warehouse. Michael said that Amazon told employees that “the last day the person was at the warehouse was April 6th supposedly. We don’t know who they are, what department they were in, or anything.”

He continued, “We were told they would be reviewing the camera footage to see who was close to the person and then reaching out to those people. But I have not heard of anyone being contacted. The ones reviewing the footage are not doctors, and they have our lives in their hands.”

He was angry that Amazon did not shut down the facility for even a day. While the company has made belated efforts to conduct temperature checks on workers and provide limited masks and cleaning supplies, he asserted it is not enough.

The masks themselves have caused Michael to experience breathing problems and fatigue, since the workers are still pressured to work at high speeds despite the added gear. “When I’m packing and wearing my PPE, I can barely work,” he said. “The mask makes glasses fog up, and I can’t breathe, all while working very hard. I legit feel like I’m going to pass out.”

The problems will clearly get worse as the weather warms up. Amazon is already notorious for forcing workers to work in extreme heat. The company’s website tells prospective employees that temperatures in the warehouses range up to 90 degrees, but workers have countered that they go much higher.

Michael also pointed out the impossible situation that workers are put in, having to choose between staying home or getting paid. Amazon claims they will not fire an employee who stays home because they feel sick, yet they will not get paid for time off unless they test positive for the virus, placing enormous pressure on workers to come to work sick.

“They haven’t even given us any extra paid time like personal or vacation,” Michael explained. “We don’t

even have sick time normally, so if we do not have the virus and are not told by Amazon or a doctor to quarantine, we will not get unemployment. So it really screws us and puts us in a shifty predicament.”

This is the same problem that workers face in many industries, such as nursing homes, meatpacking and food processing plants, and grocery stores. Despite now being deemed “essential” by employers and the government, these workers and many others are scraping by on poverty wages, frequently lacking paid sick time. Without widespread testing, workers who are not aware that they are infected—and are facing immense financial pressures to continue working—will unknowingly infect others.

Under conditions in which management mandates that production continue despite the dangers to workers’ lives for the sake of Amazon’s profits, workers are now speaking out and organizing wildcat walkouts and demonstrations. Job actions and protests by Amazon workers have already taken place in Illinois, Michigan and New York, as well as Italy, France and Spain.

“I’m really in shock over all this and feel there are going to be more cases, and I am very concerned that I have to trust them to tell us,” Michael said. “At the end of the day, especially now that more and more warehouses have confirmed cases, they need to systematically shut down. We shouldn’t be working.”

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