

“How many people have to die for us to be treated like human beings?”

Tracy, California Amazon worker speaks out on coworker’s death

By Evan Blake
30 April 2020

At least one Amazon worker at the main Tracy, California warehouse has died of COVID-19, while multiple other workers at the facility have tested positive, according to a whistleblower using the pseudonym “John” who spoke with the *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV).

Management at the Tracy facility, which employs 2,000 workers and is located 60 miles east of San Francisco, have kept secret the identity of the deceased worker. This is the second death acknowledged by the company, following the death of an infected worker from its Hawthorne facility, in California, on March 31. It took two weeks for the company to announce the previous fatality, identified by his family on social media as 35-year-old Gerard Tuzara.

On May 1, Amazon will be ending its provision of unlimited unpaid time off (UPT), compelling workers to either return to deadly conditions or get fired and become ineligible for unemployment benefits.

“The first person to get infected at our facility *just died*, and now they’re telling all of us to go back to work,” John commented. “The place is filthy, they’re not cleaning anything, they’re not giving us PPE [personal protective equipment]. How many people have to die for us to be treated like human beings? It’s either you risk your life going to work, or you quit and don’t have a job.”

John has worked as a full-time “picker” at the warehouse for roughly two years and spoke out last year on the brutal conditions faced at the facility in the aftermath of the Camp Fire, the deadliest wildfire in the state’s history, which killed 86 people and destroyed the town of Paradise. The fire produced a cloud of toxic smoke that blanketed the Central Valley and Bay Area regions for weeks, temporarily giving Northern California the worst air quality in the world. Management at the Tracy Amazon facility, where over 2,000 workers are employed, forced elderly and at-risk workers to continue working without providing any protections such as face masks, as the toxic air recirculated throughout the warehouse.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the same facility has again imposed unsafe and now deadly working conditions, leading to at least one death and an unknown number of infections at the workplace. John noted that temperatures in Tracy have recently

been in the 90s (Fahrenheit), likely exceeding 100 degrees inside due to a lack of air conditioning, while Amazon has provided totally inadequate sanitization measures.

As management informed workers about the death on Tuesday, they absurdly claimed that the employee hadn’t gotten infected at work, despite this being the most likely source of infection. “They’re not saying who passed away, or from what department,” John noted. “They just told us to go back to work, and then increased the volume after telling us this person died.”

John said that after learning of their coworker’s death, “Everyone was pissed. Some people were crying. A lot of people said, ‘They don’t give a f... about us.’ In the break room, you hear people say, ‘what will it take for them to clean this place, do more people have to die?’”

Tracy Amazon workers first learned in early April that their coworker had fallen ill via a mass text from the company. In addition to the worker who has now died, “they sent us two text messages this week about other workers who have tested positive,” said John. “They’ve only told us about three people. There has to be more, there’s no way it’s just those three. And is it really only one person who has died, or is it more than one?”

A report released two weeks ago found that at least two thirds of Amazon’s US distribution centers had workers who have tested positive for COVID-19, based on media reports and government health data. Given that Amazon is providing minimal protections for workers and is not testing anyone or publicly reporting all cases, this is likely a gross underestimate.

After the first worker tested positive, management began using a forehead thermometer to take workers’ temperatures as they went inside. Now thermal imaging is being used to check body temperatures. Beyond the fact that temperatures inside the warehouse can exceed 100 degrees, there is no validity to the use of temperature checks to screen for COVID-19, since asymptomatic workers can spread the disease. A systematic testing program, needed to identify those infected, trace all their contacts and provide victims of disease with immediate medical treatment, has been deliberately hamstrung by the federal and state governments.

In mid-March, as the pandemic spread across the US, statewide

lockdowns went into effect and anger over dangerous conditions grew among workers, Amazon implemented a new company-wide policy providing unlimited unpaid time off (UPT). Normally, workers only get 20 UPT hours every four months, or eight unpaid sick days per year.

As part of the worldwide back-to-work drive being pushed by the financial aristocracy and its pliant media, starting May 1 Amazon is cutting off this limited reprieve for workers. John commented, "Now you either have to go back to work, risk getting sick and risk your life, or you don't go to work, don't have any money, and risk losing everything, because you won't have any money to live. To make it worse, you can't go on unemployment if you get fired. So basically, they're forcing us to risk our lives or go broke."

He added, "They told us the policy ends May 1 because 'everything is getting better,' but it's actually getting worse. *Someone just died.* After the 14-day incubation period, we'll see a lot more people will be sick in early May, followed by more deaths."

In response to the ending of unlimited UPT, Amazon workers across the US and internationally are planning to carry out strike action on May 1. John said he supported these actions by Amazon workers and that he would discuss this with his coworkers.

Management at the Tracy facility have imposed sweatshop conditions on workers that have continued to work during the pandemic because they cannot afford extended periods of unpaid time off. Beyond the extreme temperatures, workloads have increased substantially as nearby facilities have closed and many workers have taken advantage of the extra UPT hours.

John described the conditions as follows: "It's ridiculously hot in there, and we have to wear our face masks all the time. We have no air conditioning, it's like a furnace. When you're inside a truck loading a trailer, it's above 100 degrees and you have no air. We're used to having two people loading or unloading a truck at a time, but due to the virus we can only have one, so we're doing twice as much work as usual. We have elderly people doing the work of two or even three people."

He continued, "They said they clean the warehouse every 15 minutes, but that's a lie. I've never seen anyone clean our spaces or clean the scanners, even the bathrooms are cleaned maybe three times a day. They didn't give us masks until the beginning of April, and it wasn't until April 10, after someone tested positive, that they made it mandatory to wear them. That worker had gotten sick before they started requiring us to wear masks."

John noted that one factor behind their particularly awful conditions is their manager's ruthless ambition. He said, "We got a new manager recently, so he's trying to make himself look better to corporate by having us do twice as much work. He's trying to prove a point. I heard that at one of the managing staff meetings, he said he wants to prove he can do more work with less people."

Commenting on the fact that Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos has amassed over \$25 billion since the start of the pandemic, while US billionaires have garnered over \$280 billion, John stated, "They're making so much money off of death. Bezos wouldn't have that money if it wasn't for us and he's not worthy of having it. He

doesn't treat his employees the way he should. We're all treated like slaves. It's just modernized slavery."

Discussing the criminal response of the Trump administration to the pandemic and the back-to-work campaign, John noted, "They don't want us to stop working, because we are what keeps the economy going. If we stop, their money flow stops, that's why they're forcing us back to work again."

John also denounced the response by California's Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom, who is implementing plans to reopen the economy under unsafe conditions and facilitating the criminal practices of Amazon and other major corporations. He said, "They are all working together in one network, everybody is scratching each other's backs. Everybody in the political system is connected to each other. They put on a show to take our attention away from what is happening, but all of this is orchestrated."

Regarding the bipartisan bailout of Wall Street through the CARES Act, John stated, "These monopolies are making so much money that they're stopping all these mom and pop businesses. Now these banks are loaning out all this money, which the small businesses won't be able to pay back. There will be a greater divide of society into working class people and the capitalists. There will barely be a middle class anymore."

On the absence of sufficient workplace protections, he added, "There's no concern for human life anymore. If you're not in this class where you're making enough money, your life doesn't matter. If you make enough money, then your life matters. They don't care about the working class families losing mothers, fathers, grandparents, children."

John had tried to contact KCRA News, the local NBC affiliate in Sacramento, to see if they would cover this story but he never heard back from them. He agreed that this was an example of how the corporate media served the interests of the capitalist class.

Speaking on the way forward for Amazon workers, John said he agreed with the IAWV statement calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees at every facility, stressing that the rate system needs to be replaced with something that all workers can manage, so that they're not competing with each other.

John stressed that the health of workers must be the number one priority, saying, "If they want us to be open, it needs to follow protocol. If someone is infected, they need to shut down for two weeks, clean the facility, and make sure we have proper equipment and good air circulation. Now that it's spreading like it is right now, they need to shut down and have the entire day and night shifts get tested. You have over 2,000 people going into a place where people have been infected. How many of those people will get sick and how many will die?"

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