

Workers sickened after Amazon sprays industrial strength chemicals to disinfect warehouse

By Samuel Davidson
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At least three Amazon workers in Ohio fell sick after management sprayed industrial strength chemicals to disinfect a warehouse while workers were still inside, according to information provided to the *International Amazon Workers' Voice*.

Amazon workers from the Cincinnati, Ohio area told the IAWV that company officials first tried to conceal the fact that four workers at the facility had tested positive for COVID-19. Once word began to spread among workers that there were confirmed cases of the coronavirus in the warehouse, management decided to have the warehouse “decontaminated.” According to workers, this meant spraying industrial-strength disinfecting chemicals in the workplace while workers continued to work.

“The HR [human resources] team has neglected to notify employees that there were four cases of positive COVID-19 until time had passed and the word was getting out,” said an Ohio worker with first-hand knowledge who was interviewed by the IAWV.

Amazon has fired numerous workers who have spoken out about safety concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic, so this worker asked to remain anonymous.

At the beginning of May, “there was a text sent to employees stating a coworker had tested positive in April and the HR team was taking precautions. The management had a company come in to spray industrial strength sanitizer during work hours without closing the facility down for the recommended two hours,” the worker said.

“Two employees had to leave because they came in contact with the chemical resulting in hives, rash, itchy skin and one employee became nauseous and had to leave,” the worker continued. “The company who

sprayed had their employee in hazmat gear including respirators. Not once did it dawn on the management that the employees should not be in contact with the chemical or breathe it in.”

“Since that incident, management has required the company to spray at 4:30 AM while employees wait to start, sitting in the break room (6ft apart) for 30 minutes.”

The company hired to do the disinfecting recommends that no employees work in the area for two hours, and then only with proper ventilation. Amazon has “still not acknowledged the recommendations of the company spraying the facility,” said the worker.

The Amazon worker was not able to identify what specific chemical was used at the facility, but recommendations associated with several major chemicals that used as airborne disinfectants are for the area to be sealed for two hours followed by another two hours of ventilation.

The Centers for Disease Control, the US federal agency responsible for promulgating guidelines during the coronavirus pandemic, recommends that anyone who comes in contact with someone who has been infected with COVID-19 needs to self quarantine for 14 days to prevent the spread of the disease. If this guideline had been followed, Amazon would have placed the entire shift on a 14-day leave.

In addition, the CDC recommends that areas where an infected person worked should be ventilated for 24 hours before cleaning begins.

“Since the beginning of the pandemic Amazon seems to think they are above the law and do not have to follow the stay-at-home order or the temp

[temperature] checks as requested by our governor Mike Dewine,” the Ohio worker said.

“I have not returned to work yet and I’m not sure I’m going to. From what I know, my Amazon facility started temperature checks and is requiring face masks at the start of every shift.”

Throughout the pandemic, Amazon has continued to rake in billions in profits. While many businesses are going bankrupt, Amazon’s wealth has increased dramatically.

While seeing an initial fall in the value of its stock at the beginning of the pandemic in the United States, the company stock has fully recovered and continued to grow. In January, the company stock stood at a little less than \$1,900 per share, and in February, the stock rose to a high of \$2,170 before falling to less than \$1,700 per share in March.

Since mid-March Amazon stock has climbed to over \$2,400 per share, a rise of greater than 25 percent since the beginning of the year. Amazon oligarch Jeff Bezos saw his personal wealth has increase by more than \$34 billion.

Amazon has plenty of money. When management refuses to slow down the pace of work to address a safety issue, it is a deliberate decision to place corporate profit ahead of workers’ lives.

“It’s not right that Bezos is making tons of money while us employees had nothing to fall back on,” the Ohio worker said. “A coworker emailed Jeff Bezos and asked him these exact questions. They got a s—response from one of his senior management,” the worker said.

“Amazon’s commercials are lies, what they speak are lies and how good we are treated are lies. Especially the facility I work in,” the worker said. “If you are a tier 1 employee in an orange vest you are considered unworthy of honest communication.”

The worker was also very concerned about the treatment of workers who had to take time off because their children were now home from school. He has two children in school, including one in elementary school.

Amazon is “penalizing employees for taking off due to the schools being closed,” the worker said. “Amazon did not care about employees who had to take time off for school closures. We had to take unpaid time off in order to home-school our kids.”

The worker explained that Amazon has some benefits

that are attractive, particularly to students, and he has enjoyed his job and meeting his co-workers. “But the mental anguish that we suffer is uncalled for and unacceptable.”

The Socialist Equality Party and the *International Amazon Workers’ Voice* are working to assist Amazon workers around the world with the formation of rank-and-file safety committees, which will enforce the necessary self-defense measures to protect workers’ lives from management indifference during the pandemic. We encourage all Amazon workers to read the recent statement posted on the *World Socialist Web Site*, sign up for the IAWV newsletter, and contact us to get involved today.

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