

Amazon violates its own health and safety rules in COVID-19 coverup

By Nick Barrickman and Patrick Smith
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The COVID-19 pandemic continues to rip through Amazon warehouses around the United States. The company, which has seen an unprecedented rise in its revenues over the course of the first six months of 2020 due to increased demand, still continues to hide the real human cost of its fortunes in the untold number of illnesses and deaths.

According to Jana Jump, an Amazon whistleblower, the company has at least 1,779 confirmed COVID-19 cases in the United States as of mid-July. To date, the former Amazon employee has mounted the only systematic effort to track cases at the company in the United States. For its part, Amazon has told media outlets that reporting numbers of cases “isn’t particularly useful.”

Last month, Amazon reported its year-over-year sales profits stood at \$88.9 billion, more than double its earnings from a year ago and far dwarfing its often-touted \$4 billion in reported safety precautions it has spent during the pandemic. The corporation has expanded its market capitalization to over \$1.5 trillion, and its CEO, Jeff Bezos has added nearly \$74 billion to his wealth over the course of the pandemic due to the rising value of Amazon’s stock. Bezos’s wealth currently stands at \$189 billion. It is speculated that if his wealth continues to grow at the current rate, Bezos may become the world’s first trillionaire.

Last week, a worker at Amazon’s MEM1 facility in Memphis, Tennessee wrote on social media that 35 workers “walked out of my job ... because they tested positive” for COVID-19. This is just one of many locations where workers have reported serious outbreaks. On Saturday, several dozen workers in San Leandro, California protested Amazon’s lack of effective social distancing and meager sanitation measures.

With nearly 5 million confirmed coronavirus infections in the US—the highest in the world—the actual number of cases at Amazon is doubtlessly many multiples higher than even Jump’s estimates. The corporation regularly sends texts to its employees reporting that an undisclosed number of “individuals” in the facility have been diagnosed with the highly contagious COVID-19 virus. No further information is given, such as where the worker was stationed, who has been in contact with them, or other such useful health-related facts. Such communications invariably conclude with the company’s claim that its “top concern” is health and safety.

“There is a disconnect between what is being said in the media and what is really going on in [Amazon],” said Jonathan, who spoke to the *International Amazon Workers Voice* (IAWV) using a fake name out of fear the company would retaliate. “I think it’s disgusting that they make it seem like everything is rainbows and happiness when that’s not the case,” he added, referring to the series of propaganda news reports paid for by Amazon on local news channels throughout the pandemic, which lie to the public about the real situation in warehouses.

A recent investigation conducted in Las Vegas, Nevada further testifies to the company’s lies. According to ABC News, which obtained internal emails from sources inside Amazon warehouses in southern Nevada, “the company’s public relations team deemed local news reports about the situation as ‘inaccurate,’” telling employees “to disregard news stories” about cases accumulating at its locations. The email stated that “hopefully” management would report such cases directly to the workforce.

“It’s hard to say you are sanitizing the place, which is not sanitized, by using it every day, the whole time

we're there," an anonymous Amazon worker told ABC News. They called on Amazon to "close [a warehouse] down for two days since you hired so many people or allow those who are [sic] sick not to feel threatened with their jobs if they need to take off."

This, of course, is not acceptable to Amazon's bottom line. "Management isn't telling us anything," Jonathan noted, who experienced symptoms similar to COVID-19 in June. Jonathan was nearly fired last month after complying with the company's own rules requiring a written doctor's permission to return to work after he went to get tested for COVID-19.

"I felt like I was having an upper respiratory issue. It's nothing I've ever experienced before in my life so I decided to quarantine and get tested." After facing the uncertainty of being tested, and thankfully coming up negative for the virus, Jonathan was required to receive a written notification approving his return to work.

The following day he received a UPT (unpaid time off) email notifying him that he was missing work without permission. "I responded to this email telling them I was waiting for my results and gave them my case number that was given to me by HR," he said. The UPT emails continued to come for a total of three days until, on the fourth day, he got sent a "job abandonment" email.

"All along, I was responding, answering these emails with no response. After I got that email, they locked me out of the email system. It seemed like I was being punished." Finally, after calling and emailing numerous times to HR and the "Leave Team," he was cleared to return to work. Jonathan has since taken another leave due to fears that management is continuing to hide the total number of cases of COVID-19 from workers.

Jonathan also noted the hypocrisy of companies like Amazon which have sought to posture as defenders of "black lives" in the wake of massive social protests against police brutality following the May killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. "During the funeral for George Floyd, a message came out over the intercom for everybody to stop working for eight minutes, the amount of time the cop had his knee on Floyd's neck. I couldn't take it. I had to walk off the job. They don't care about him or any of their workers. All they care about is their profits," he said.

Rather than appealing to corporations such as

Amazon to defend lives of workers, it is necessary for workers in logistics to form independent rank and file safety committees to take every measure necessary to protect themselves from the coronavirus. These committees must strive to build ties with workers at United Parcel Service and the United States Postal Service, which faces threats of privatization.

"I really appreciate what you guys do. You're pointing out the fact that it doesn't matter where you work or what country that you work in, we're all in the same boat. The pandemic has pulled back the curtain and revealed that the 'essential' workers are expendable," Jonathan concluded in his comments to the IAWV.

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