Amazon workers in New York City shut down warehouse after worker tests positive for coronavirus

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On Wednesday, Amazon warehouse workers at a processing facility in Queens, New York City, received a text from management: “We’re writing to let you know that a positive case of the coronavirus (COVID-19) was found at our facility today.” Amazon temporarily closed the facility the same day but quickly reopened on Thursday.

This news, and the decision by Amazon to reopen the facility, sparked outrage among the warehouse workers, who refused to work and ultimately caused the facility to shut down on Thursday night. In a video posted on social media by "Amazonians United NYC," a worker voiced his anger.

“We know what you’re doing. We can see that there’s an absolute disregard for our lives. We don’t buy it anymore.” Another worker joined, saying: “It’s not possible that in four hours you’ve disinfected every package after you got a positive diagnosis.”

According to a study published in the New England Journal of Medicine, the virus which causes COVID-19 can survive for up to 72 hours in plastic, 48 hours on stainless steel, 24 hours on cardboard, 4 hours on copper, and up to 3 hours in the air.

Amazon warehouse workers each handle thousands of packages per day and work in close proximity to one another.

The worker was found to be infected after New York City finally began to escalate its testing program. As of this writing on a Friday night, there are 5,151 patients with confirmed cases of COVID-19. On Thursday night that figure was about 3,600. The increases in confirmed cases has been exponential in scope, after the first case in the city was discovered on March 1. In a city where many residents rely on public transportation for work and live in close proximity to one another, the real figures of infected are likely far higher. Thus far, the New York City been one of the centers of the outbreak in the United States.

Whole Foods, a subsidiary of Amazon, also reported that a worker in Columbus Circle, NYC, was diagnosed with COVID-19 the same night as the Queens Amazon warehouse worker. The response from Whole Foods has been just as callous. The store was closed for one night only and reopened the next day. It has recently been reported that a second NYC Whole Foods worker has tested positive and the same measures were applied.

COVID-19 has already had an immense impact on the global economy, as millions of workers around the world are being laid off or otherwise left without pay. At the same time, workers in grocery stores and distribution have faced sharply increasing workloads as consumers stock up on essential goods and order online.

According to Guru Hariharan, CEO of CommerceIQ, which helps brands sell on Amazon, sales of many packaged goods have more than doubled compared to a year ago in just the first two weeks of March. Sales for a specific 27-pack of 1,000-sheet toilet paper were up 944 percent over the same period in 2019, he added.

In response to this surge in demand, Amazon announced on March 11 that it would be hiring an additional 100,000 warehouse workers. However, the Amazon workers are yet to be employed and those that are currently on the job are working longer and harder amidst a developing pandemic. In this context, workers have condemned the supposed safety measures adopted by Amazon as recklessly inadequate.

The conglomerate has given a measly $2 per hour

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raise, to $17 per hour, to their workers, which will be in effect only until the end of April, while offering workers the option to take “unlimited unpaid time off."

If a worker is actually diagnosed with COVID-19, they are given two weeks of paid leave. This is wholly insufficient for multiple reasons. First, the absence of testing means that many workers who become infected will not be able to confirm the diagnosis. In addition, the coronavirus has a hospitalization rate of 15 to 20 percent and may require months of treatment.

Finally and most importantly, persons who are infected with COVID-19 can spread the disease before they exhibit symptoms, which can take up to two weeks. In other words, the presence of a single confirmed case in a workplace means that many more workers have already been exposed.

Amazon announced this week that shipments of “non-essential” items to warehouses would be limited. But consumers are still able to purchase the most frivolous items from the Amazon website, from Star Wars bottle openers to copies of Ayn Rand's book “Atlas Shrugged."

Amazon workers are seething over risks that are taken with their lives and the lives of their families. They are contacting each other on social media and exchanging combative messages. One Amazon worker posted on Facebook: "I’ve yet to see 1 of the cleaning crew disinfecting hand rails, elevator buttons, actually anything we touch on the daily. IMO, if they insist on being open, it should only be stations [with] enough latex gloves and lysol wipes to stock at.”

Another worker remarked, “They’re taking advantage of the workers who actually need that extra money but Amazon is putting SO many people at risk! This should not be legal to do especially with the amount of people we work with! These packages are coming from all around the world ... no one can control that. It's just not fair.”

The state is collaborating with Amazon to force warehouse employees to continue to work in dangerous conditions. New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo announced an executive order directing all non-essential business statewide to close in-office functions effective on Sunday at 8:00 p.m.

However, among the list of "essential" businesses are Amazon warehouses, which are specifically exempted from state protections. This mirrors the recent bipartisan measure passed in Congress which providers workers with limited paid leave. This measure excludes workplaces with over 500 employees, which amounts to nearly half the US workforce, including most Amazon workers.

The *World Socialist Web Site* welcomes efforts by workers to organize and fight for their their health and safety in the midst of the pandemic. A statement of the Socialist Equality Party National Committee published Monday provides: "Where work must continue, such as in the health care industry, transportation, food production and other sectors essential to the functioning of society, measures must be implemented to ensure the safety of workers and guarantee that their rights are preserved. Every work location must be staffed with trained health care professionals, with workers provided with necessary equipment, including protective clothing, masks and gloves."

If you work at Amazon or any other workplace where management's purported safety measures have been non-existent or inadequate, or where workers are taking action to defend their rights, we are very anxious to hear from you. Please use the following link to contact us.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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