

Retail and service industry workers demand safety measures, store closures and full compensation during coronavirus pandemic

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23 March 2020

As the coronavirus spreads rapidly throughout the United States, retail and service industry employees, primarily low-wage workers, have vociferously denounced corporations for continuing to stay open and not providing proper safety measures. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has warned against large gatherings, but many retail workers across the US are put at risk by employers still requiring employees to work.

Retail workers, particularly in grocery stores, are at high risk of contracting COVID-19 as they interact with hundreds of customers on a daily basis. Many have stated they do not have paid sick leave, meaning workers are forced to choose between their paychecks and their safety. The predicament is compounded by employers' failure to supply cleaning and sanitation supplies.

Baristas at Starbucks voiced their frustration last week with the company's decision to only implement limited closures and safety measures in response to the pandemic. Starbucks has justified the decision to stay open by describing itself as an "essential business."

Aniya Johnson, a Starbucks barista in Philadelphia, told the *World Socialist Web Site* her experience has been "terrifying" and stated her coworkers were fearful of catching and spreading the virus.

"We know that most young people can be asymptomatic, leaving the elderly and babies at risk. Even with all the 'precautionary measures,' there are still ways that it can be spread. Management hasn't really been too helpful. Store managers sympathize with you because they have to come to work, too. However, they have the advantage of not always being on the floor. Upper management gets to work from

home and still go on about their day, as if store level concerns don't exist. It's frustrating."

Johnson started a petition demanding that Starbucks suspend business at all locations and pay its workers during the duration of the coronavirus outbreak, and called for workers to stay at home today in protest. The petition has gathered over 37,000 signatures and compelled Starbucks to announce Friday the closure of its café stores and the limiting of its services to mobile ordering and drive-thru. Even with limited service, some Starbucks workers are still encountering hundreds of customers throughout their workday.

The company has also offered 30 days of paid leave to workers who feel unsafe. After that one month is up it is not clear what options will be available to workers. If a Starbucks worker comes into contact with someone who later tests positive for COVID-19 or contracts it themselves, they could qualify for "catastrophe pay."

Dave, another Starbucks worker, did not feel that the company's recent decision went far enough to protect workers and their communities. Dave responded to what he felt was an inadequate response by calling for a customer boycott and starting a social media group called "The Baristas Collective for Starbucks workers" to organize and make demands.

"The situation surrounding COVID-19 is stressful. We're being told constantly that we need to stay home and practice social distancing. We hear that from every government and health authority, but Starbucks is saying otherwise. They gave us 30 days off as a publicity stunt."

Last year the global coffee chain spent \$12 billion on stock buybacks and dividends, rewarding its investors and pumping up its stock valuation. This same amount

would be enough to cut every single employee around the world a \$41,000 check, making clear that what the company is now offering is a mere pittance.

Dave spoke with multiple baristas across the US who say they are being actively discouraged from taking the 30 days paid leave and feel pressured to keep working at Starbucks.

“Baristas are in danger, their families are in danger, and their loved ones are in danger. Yet Starbucks doesn’t care. This corporation is putting thousands of lives at risk for a quick buck, and that’s why we’re organizing. It’s time to stand up,” he said.

Workers at the Whole Foods grocery chain, owned by Amazon CEO and world’s richest man Jeff Bezos, also conveyed their dissatisfaction with the way the company is handling the outbreak. A longtime employee who wanted to remain anonymous described upper management at Whole Foods lagging behind other grocers in their reaction. The worker said that the most immediate responses came from workers in the stores.

“I feel like we took on sanitation at my store before directions were handed down from above. As soon as our cooler emptied, we started scrubbing walls, floors, prep areas, everything. We sanitized all tables and shelves as they emptied. Our store leader hired a third-party company to sanitize as well,” the worker said.

“Regional and global leadership are disastrously inept. Full of yes men who have failed upward. No minds of their own for the most part. Most of them in my opinion are too young to have perspective on this real-life crisis—due to a cycle of continuous firing and rehiring. We are held together by the glue of a very few extremely competent folks, but most of the regional and global management is a disaster.”

Workers at retail giants Walmart and Target have also spoken out about the two companies not doing enough to protect staff during the outbreak. In several interviews with other news publications, workers said they were anxious about working in crowded conditions. Their frustration was aggravated by increased workloads, understaffing and inadequate sanitation practices.

Several Target workers spoke to the *Guardian* about management dismissing workers’ fears of contracting or transmitting the coronavirus to family members. A Target employee in New Mexico told the publication

he had been wearing a N95 protective mask out of concern for his niece, who is going through chemotherapy. Management told him he needed to obtain a doctor’s note in order to be permitted to continue wearing it.

“They said I would not be allowed to work with it until I had brought back this paper form. I told them it was not worth it to me to risk the life of a little girl. I told them, while trying to hold back tears, that this wasn’t right,” he said.

In a few cases, some workers have forced companies to shut down stores. Video game store chain GameStop recently announced that it would close all of its US locations after workers threatened to walk out because of unsanitary conditions. However, many retail workers remain in a vulnerable position on the front lines of the pandemic.



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