

Boeing closes Seattle-area plants after worker's coronavirus death

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Airplane manufacturer and defense giant Boeing announced Monday a two-week suspension of operations at its Puget Sound, Washington-area plants. The announcement was made the day after the death from COVID-19 of a worker at its Everett facility. There are about 70,000 Boeing employees in the area, with the Everett plant employing over 30,000 of those.

No information at this time is available about the worker other than that he is a 58-year-old flight line inspector. His family posted news of his death on social media.

According to the *Seattle Times*, “A senior Boeing executive, who asked not to be identified because of the sensitivity of the situation, said the decision to shut down was not triggered directly by the death of a Boeing Everett worker on Sunday, but was ‘based on the rate of increase of the coronavirus cases in the broader Seattle community as well as inside the plant.’”

Boeing’s press release, containing the usual platitudes, described the closures as being taken “to ensure the well-being of employees, their families and the local community.” It promised that additional deep cleaning will take place and “a rigorous criteria for a return to work” established.

A growing section of corporate America and its paid mouthpieces in the media are pushing for a swift end to business closures and reduced economic activity—regardless of the potential cost of hundreds of thousands or more deaths. “I think people would be very pleasantly surprised if [the Boeing shutdown] was just two weeks,” Ken Herbert, industry analyst with the bank Canaccord Genuity, told the *Seattle Times*.

Also on Monday, Boeing confirmed the first COVID-19 case at its South Carolina plant. Boeing employs more than 6,800 people at that facility. Other

than a “thorough cleaning of the work area,” Boeing did not address the possibility of closing that plant.

The shutdown, planned to be completed by Wednesday, will come three weeks after a worker at the Everett 777 plant was sent home with flu-like symptoms. Five days later, March 9, Boeing confirmed the first worker in its plants to have contracted the coronavirus. It is unknown if the worker sent home and the confirmed case were the same. By March 12 the company had confirmed five cases at its Everett facility, stating that they were in quarantine and receiving medical care. As of Saturday, 29 COVID-19 cases at Boeing’s Puget Sound facilities had been confirmed, with over 1,000 workers self-quarantined.

Washington state had been the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic in the US until overtaken by New York last week. Despite this, the state did not move to close non-essential business and implement a “stay-at-home” order until just Monday, following earlier shutdowns in California, New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

The center of Washington’s outbreak, which began in February—a Kirkland nursing home—had infected 115 of its residents and employees and killed an estimated 33 residents as of Friday. Federal nursing-home regulators charged the home yesterday with failing to respond quickly, thereby placing residents in imminent danger. It still remains the largest single point of infection and mortality in the state, and perhaps the country.

Democratic Governor Jay Inslee praised Boeing for its belated decision to close its facilities, which has been endangering workers, their families and the wider population for weeks. “I spoke with Boeing Commercial CEO Stan Deal early this morning. I applaud Boeing’s decision to implement an orderly shutdown and continue to pay its workers during this

difficult time.”

In 2013, Inslee oversaw the largest tax cut in United States history for Boeing, \$8.7 billion. At the same time, along with Boeing and the corporate media, he sought to blackmail the 33,000 machinists who built Boeing’s planes into extending their contract to 2024 and accepting deep concessions, and threatened to move jobs to other states if they did not. The demands, initially rejected by a two-to-one vote, were accepted when the International Association of Machinists (IAM) pushed through a re-vote while making clear they would not lead any fight against the concessions.

The IAM has been complicit with Boeing in curbing the machinists’ anger over continuing production under conditions where the coronavirus has obviously not been contained. Previously opposing any closures, Local 751 insisted, “If we demand that operations be shut down, we have no way of knowing how long a shutdown will last and how much pay members will receive.” Turning 180 degrees without explanation, Local 751 posted Monday on its Facebook site, “...we support this action and hope this will reduce the rate of infection within our membership at work and in the community at large.”

Workers responded to this with anger, with one writing “Nice to see you guys finally support us AFTER we lost a union brother and not a second before.”

Workers have been demanding the plants’ closure as the only effective way to limit and stop the spread of COVID-19. In an interview with KOMO 4-TV news, a machinist stated, “I don’t want to see people go without money or lose their job. But, in the benefit of elderly or people who would get really sick or potentially die from this disease, or virus, yeah, I think it would be of the benefit of everyone to shut it down.”

He added, “Morale is pretty low. People are pretty upset with the lack of information, lack of cleaning supplies, lack of PPE [personal protective equipment].”

Workers have been increasingly calling for the plants to shut down in recent weeks, decrying the absence of adequate cleaning supplies and overstretched cleaning staff.

“There is no one cleaning or disinfecting high touch areas, no hand sanitizer left, no way to work six feet apart,” one told the *Seattle Weekly*.

“We’ve run out of disinfectant wipes, respirators and

hand sanitizer. So we’ve been told to use the alcohol that we normally only use to clean the plane,” another said.

The impact of the coronavirus on the aviation industry as a whole has compounded Boeing’s already severe crisis surrounding its deadly 737 Max 8 aircraft. Two of the jets crashed in 2018 and 2019, killing 346 people and forcing the grounding of its new plane worldwide.

In the midst of widespread layoffs and shutdowns in air travel, a jobs massacre and new attacks on Boeing workers is in the offing. Wall Street responded to the shutdown by boosting Boeing’s sagging stock, down a jaw-dropping 70 percent over the last few weeks and 18 percent last Wednesday. On Monday, the stock price bucked the overall market decline, rising 11 percent.

Responding to this ongoing crisis, Boeing has lobbied hard for a large part of the Trump administration’s bailout for banks and corporations. It has requested \$60 billion, to which President Trump has responded obligingly, saying recently, “Yes, I think we have to protect Boeing. We have to absolutely help Boeing. Obviously when the airlines aren’t doing well then Boeing is not going to be doing well. So we’ll be helping Boeing.”



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