Under pressure from online protests over coronavirus concerns, GameStop shutters California stores

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Under pressure from growing online worker protests, GameStop, the well-known video game retailer, was forced to close all of its stores in California, one of number of states currently under stay-at-home orders in a belated effort to slow the spread of COVID-19.

The multinational corporation, which in 2016 employed 20,000 full-time and 30,000 to 60,000 part-time workers and grossed nearly $3 billion in profits, initially refused to close its stores in the face of the statewide lockdown, falsely arguing that it was among the state's essential businesses and could continue operating. The company prepared a letter that workers were told to show to police if officers came to enforce the California lockdown.

Workers voiced concerns on Reddit, where they expressed fears of threatening the lives of customers by spreading the coronavirus if the company chose to keep their stores open during the pandemic. One worker commented that many stores never received "sanitization supplies and hand sanitizer" for "high-touch surfaces" which the company promised it would distribute. The worker also stated that the company is "taking advantage of this awful situation" while "lying to everyone" for the sake of protecting their bottom line.

In the face of mounting anger from workers, GameStop announced that workers eligible for Paid Time Off (PTO) would be given an additional two-week extension of PTO, while non-PTO-eligible workers would receive wage payments for two weeks calculated on the average wages earned in the past ten weeks. Workers eligible for full-time benefits received reimbursements for one full month of benefit contributions for next month.

These half-measure concessions, which went into effect Sunday, also included keeping stores in the rest of the United States operating with "delivery-to-door" service. GameStop workers across the country must still show up for work, the only difference being that products will be given to customers at the door or curb of the store, instead of inside the building.

While some workers voiced relief after the company decided to close down its stores in California and grant new compensation conditions, many simultaneously expressed anger toward the executives of the company. Many workers and customers, through Reddit, stated that these measures were the least the company should have done from the beginning of the pandemic. Responses also included overflowing support for GameStop workers who resigned or protested the company's initial response.

Anger among workers increased when news broke, on Reddit again, that GameXChange, one of GameStop's competitors, was still operating "business as usual," aiming to profit off of GameStop's store closures. The worker who broke this information explained the conditions in his store and the false public health information which executives told employees.

"We are still taking trades of any and all kinds," he wrote. "Our VP of sales instructed us not to wear gloves because he 'read an article.' Our managers have bought us CLEANING wipes with *no disinfectant* as well as alcohol that is only 50%. They also told us to **not sanitize discs, just the boxes and not do the fronts of cartridges to protect the labels**. Chairs and tables are still out for the public to sit at. Card singles (which can't be sanitized) are still out on the floor for

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the public to touch."

The worker went on to say that GameXChange is censoring or deflecting criticism online.

A GameXChange employee from Arkansas spoke to the WSWS anonymously about the conditions these retail workers face. He stated that workers had to purchase cleaning supplies themselves to bring to work. Also, GameXChange does not provide PTO or benefits to any of its hourly employees. The worker also said that he and other GameXChange workers stood in solidarity with the GameStop workers fighting against their own company's negligent practices.

YouTube user Camelot331 published a leaked GameStop regional conference call exposing the company's internal responses to the pandemic conference call on his channel last Thursday. During the call, the executives said they were trying to get cleaning supplies to the stores in the following week and added that if cleaning supplies are insufficient, workers must purchase supplies themselves.

Threats to the personal health of GameStop workers brought up by workers on the call were brushed aside or ignored by the executives. If workers were to stay home from work due to these risks, the executives stated that that would be *their choice* and that they couldn't pay everyone who did so.

The executives, who are working from home during the pandemic, stated that the GameStop stores would continue to accept game and controller exchanges while refusing to shut down game release events, both of which draw significant numbers of people and therefore have a high risk of transmitting COVID-19.

One store manager on the call worriedly asked if they would be held responsible for workers getting infected. The executives responded by stating that protection from contracting COVID-19 is out of everyone's control.

As the call wound down, store managers raised questions regarding the company's statements that it was doing the best thing for the pandemic, while simultaneously advertising for customers to come to stores for the release of the new *Animal Crossing* game.

Earlier this month, a GameStop worker called for a national strike in a Reddit conversation, which is now locked (meaning new comments on the post are removed automatically). In the post, the worker described a brutal work environment ,with constant reprimanding of retail workers by higher management for achieving only average sales.

Camelot331, in response to the call for strike action, reached out to his corporate contact at GameStop to inquire about how the company would respond to strike action. His contact stated that GameStop "will terminate anyone that participates immediately … The people that do participate would lose all benefits and get nothing."

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