

Instacart workers in US begin nationwide walkout as Whole Foods workers plan sickout Tuesday

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Workers for Instacart, a grocery shopping and delivery service, began a nationwide walkout in the United States today to protest the company's refusal to protect them or provide hazard pay during the coronavirus pandemic. They have vowed not to return to work until the company meets their demands. Instacart employs more than 150,000 workers across the country.

The planned walkout is part of a nationwide and international fight by workers to demand safe conditions, including strikes and protests by Amazon workers, sanitation and public transit workers and workers in the auto, steel and meatpacking industries. Amazon workers in Staten Island plan to strike Monday, and workers at Whole Foods—also owned by Amazon—plan to strike Tuesday.

The coronavirus pandemic has increased demand for shopping and delivery services dramatically, as many people stay at home or in quarantine. Last week, Instacart announced plans to hire 300,000 new workers during the next three months to meet this demand.

Instacart workers (or “shoppers,” as the company calls them) have been demanding for weeks that the company institute the most elementary safety measures. “We don’t feel safe at work and we don’t feel we have the tools to keep customers safe,” said Ashley, a full-service shopper in Washington who is participating in the walkout. “The shoppers I know who aren’t sick are certainly not at their mental best. It’s a very dehumanizing and draining job right now.”

“Instacart has still not provided essential protections to shoppers on the front lines that could prevent them from becoming carriers, falling ill themselves, or worse,” said Instacart Shoppers and Gig Workers

Collective in a statement posted on *Medium* on Friday. “They are profiting astronomically off of us literally risking our lives, all while refusing to provide us with effective protection, meaningful pay, and meaningful benefits.”

“We haven’t been offered any type of cleaning products or funds to purchase such products,” said Sarah, a shopper participating in the walkout. “We haven’t been given any real information on how best to take precautions. They are doing the bare minimum and even making it hard for those who are diagnosed with COVID-19 to get paid time off.”

The walkout centers on four demands. Shoppers demand that Instacart provide them with protective supplies such as hand sanitizer, disinfectant wipes, and soap at no cost. They demand an extra \$5 per order as hazard pay and a default tip of 10 percent of the order total. They demand “an extension and expansion of pay for workers impacted by COVID-19—anyone who has a doctor’s note for either a preexisting condition that’s a known risk factor or requiring a self-quarantine,” according to Friday’s statement. Finally, they demand that the company extend the deadline to qualify for these benefits beyond April 8.

On Friday, after the shoppers announced today’s walkout, Instacart extended its offer to provide 14 days of pay to any worker diagnosed with COVID-19 through May 8. It also announced bonuses for certain employees, based on the number of hours worked. The company did not, however, agree to provide hazard pay or even the most basic protective supplies.

“Instacart’s response to our demands lacks substance and does nothing to protect us,” worker Vanessa Bain responded in a tweet. “Conceding to one demand is

way too little, way too late. They can kick rocks. Our call for an emergency walk-off still stands.”

The announcement of the walkout had already exposed the insincerity of Instacart’s promises to compensate sick employees. “Instacart’s promise to pay shoppers up to 14 days of pay if diagnosed or placed in mandatory quarantine not only falls short but isn’t even being honored. Instacart knows it’s virtually impossible to meet their qualifications and is ignoring shoppers’ pleas for more substantial and preventative help,” the statement of the Instacart Shoppers and Gig Workers Collective said.

Many Instacart shoppers are gig workers that the company classifies as self-employed contractors. They are not guaranteed a minimum wage, and the average pay for one order of groceries is a mere \$7, according to a former shopper. Furthermore, these shoppers have no paid time off, and Instacart does not contribute to unemployment insurance for them.

Some Instacart shoppers are full-time employees, however, who assemble orders in grocery stores but do not make deliveries or receive tips. Instead of providing in-store shoppers with the necessary protective gear, the company has recommended social distancing, which is impossible in crowded supermarkets. Instacart has denied in-store shoppers’ demands for hazard pay and wage increases, according to Jorge, a shopper who posted an open letter to the company on Twitter. Instead, it has offered, on a case-by-case basis, a maximum of only seven consecutive calendar days of unpaid time off.

Last year, shoppers became angry when Instacart reduced the default tip on the company’s app to 10 percent. The company refused to negotiate with them. In response, shoppers walked out from November 3 through November 5. The company retaliated by discontinuing the quality bonus that it had paid for “good work.” This spiteful act amounts to a pay cut of as much as 40 percent, depending on the order.

“The low pay is something that’s been an issue for a long time, but it’s a heightened issue now because sick people with no savings, or even next month’s rent, aren’t able to stay home,” said Ashley. “Instacart’s temporary paid sick leave has hoops most of their workforce can’t jump [through].”

“I have watched pay cut after pay cut, to where I was seeing a 50 percent or more decrease weekly,” said

Sarah. “It’s so hit or miss, and honestly the majority of what I do make is usually tips, and not Instacart payment, which means these customers are paying a bunch to Instacart, and we shoppers see barely any of that money.”

Whole Foods workers have announced their intention to conduct a sick-out tomorrow, March 31, with a flyer circulating online reading: “We put ourselves at risk! We have demands!”

Whole Foods workers’ demands include three weeks’ paid time off for everyone, “not when we get sick but so we *don’t* get sick!” In addition, workers demand double hazard pay. “Don’t tell us we’re not emergency workers. Make the \$2 wage increase permanent.” The flyer concludes, “The crisis has shown that we are worth more. We are no longer scared, but you should be.”

Sanitation workers in Pittsburgh, autoworkers in Detroit, bus drivers in Birmingham, Alabama, and Amazon workers in New York and Italy have all walked off the job after coworkers tested positive for the novel coronavirus. “I know other jobs are also walking out for mistreatment right now, and I support that,” said Ashley. “Being in public right now is well known to be dangerous and bad for the community. People should be compensated for that risk and protected if they’re forced to take it.”



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