Quarantined Amazon worker in Texas denied sick pay, unable to get tested for coronavirus

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with an Amazon worker at the DFW7 warehouse in the Dallas-Fort Worth area of Texas who has developed possible symptoms of the coronavirus. Jo, whose real name will not be used in this article, is currently under doctor's orders to "self-quarantine."

Despite having a doctor's note diagnosing her with "severe bronchitis and possible COVID-19," Jo has been told there are no tests available in her area. To her knowledge, none of the other workers at her warehouse have been told about her condition.

In addition, despite Amazon's public statements that workers who are quarantined will receive paid time off, the company has thus far failed to provide Jo with any sick pay.

Jo's experiences over the past week underscore the callous disregard exhibited by the entire social system for the lives of workers on the front lines of the efforts to counteract the pandemic.

On March 28, Jo remembers feeling unusually tired when she set out for work. By the time she arrived in the parking lot of the Amazon warehouse for the start of her 6:00 p.m. shift, she had developed a severe headache and shortness of breath, and began to feel very sick.

She did not have a thermometer with her, so she walked into AmCare, Amazon's in-house health care unit, and asked if her temperature could be taken. She was told that her temperature could not be taken "because that would violate the six-foot rule."

"The first thing I did was I went to AmCare," she said. "So I went in there and requested my temperature. And that's when I was told about the six-foot rule."

Taken aback by this Kafkaesque response from AmCare, she confronted her co-manager, who was walking past. He directed her to speak with human resources. She walked into the human resources office, where she was given numbers to call. She was given the number of a doctor's office to call and was also told to call the company medical advice line.

Jo returned to Amazon's parking lot, and a doctor evaluated her over the phone while she sat in her car. At that time, the doctor indicated that the most likely cause of her symptoms was her severe chronic bronchitis. However, the doctor told her that she had an elevated risk of having more serious health problems if she contracted the coronavirus. Jo applied for a leave of absence immediately, using her cellphone, and submitted all of the paperwork the same day.

She had recently switched insurance, and her previous doctor's office would not take her new insurance, adding an additional level of frustration to her journey through the insurance and corporate bureaucracy. Jo remembers feeling lost and in shock. "I felt like nobody could help me. There was one person telling me to talk to someone else, then another person telling me to talk to someone else. I was in the facility for an hour, talking to different people. And I went in there not feeling good."

Before developing symptoms, Jo did not appreciate that the coronavirus was a serious danger for someone living in her corner of Texas. "When you work the p.m. shift, you miss the news," she said. "I didn't even realize it was spreading at such a rate. You hear Trump saying it's bogus, it's bogus, it's a hoax, it's the flu. If that's all you hear, that's all you believe. Then all of a sudden there is blue tape telling you where you can stand, and tables are spread out and half the tables are gone."

Then she developed symptoms. "It's scary."

Jo, who has worked for Amazon for two years, developed chronic bronchitis during a previous "peak" period, which is a period of extreme stress and high activity in the warehouse. As a result, Jo now needs to carry an inhaler. The warehouse is very dusty, she explained, and the fans are rarely if ever cleaned. "They are on 24/7, and the business is open 24/7."

Jo had previously sparred with management over management's refusal to let her bring her inhaler to her station, instead forcing her to stow it in a far corner of the warehouse or in her car, where it would do her little good in an emergency.

On March 29, the day after she developed symptoms, a second doctor evaluated Jo over the phone and recommended that she be granted a two-day leave of absence while her condition continued to be monitored.

On April 3, a third doctor evaluated her and diagnosed her with "severe bronchitis and possible COVID-19." The doctor wrote a letter to Amazon, stating that Jo's condition "impairs [her] ability to work and/or is highly contagious," recommending that she "self-quarantine" for two weeks before returning to work.

For Jo, the phrase "possible COVID-19" in the doctor's note was alarming. Given the danger, especially in light of her severe chronic bronchitis, she immediately asked to be tested for the coronavirus. But she was told: "There are no tests." The available tests in her area have all been used, the doctor said. The doctor's efforts to secure a test for her were unsuccessful. She was also told that when more tests became available, they will likely be given to the patients already in the hospital with the most extreme

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symptoms.

As of this writing, Jo is still on a waitlist and has still not been tested. The doctor prescribed a course of treatment with the assumption that Jo has the coronavirus. A neighbor has been helping her with groceries and errands. “Since I’m still on leave I can’t apply for unemployment,” Jo says. “If it wasn’t for my neighbor I don’t know what I’d do.”

Meanwhile, Amazon has failed to provide Jo with sick pay. Jo points out that a glossy magazine distributed to employees states reassuringly that “Amazon employees diagnosed with COVID-19 *or placed into quarantine* will receive up to two weeks of additional paid time off, so they can get healthy without worrying about lost income.”

Despite being told that she would receive a response by Friday, April 3, Jo has thus far not been able to obtain any response from management about her sick pay.

Many workers at Amazon warehouses are concerned that management is concealing the number of possible infections and downplaying the risk. Walkouts of Amazon workers have already taken place in New York, Illinois and Michigan. In many workplaces, the discovery by workers of a diagnosed case of COVID-19 has been explosive.

One worker at DFW7 wrote an anonymous message on the VOA (“voice of associate”) board, which workers use to communicate with management, asking whether a rumor was true that three workers had already fallen ill. As of Jo’s last day in the warehouse, management had not responded to that message.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has received a tip that there may already be four suspected coronavirus cases at DFW7, based on internal emails that were circulated among area managers. In any case, workers have every right to demand that management immediately communicate all such information to workers.

Until Jo and any other suspected cases can be tested, the DFW7 facility should be immediately closed. If any worker tests positive for the virus, DFW7 must remain closed until all workers are tested and until the workplace can be thoroughly cleaned. Workers must be quarantined with full pay until these measures are implemented.

Before the pandemic, the DFW7 warehouse had already been singled out as a “meatgrinder” on the *World Socialist Web Site*, based on the discovery of records showing an incredible 567 workers were seriously injured there over a two-year period. This included whistleblower Shannon Allen, who exposed the conditions in the warehouse in a 2018 interview.

Jo, too, was injured at Amazon, despite only working there for two years. In June 2019, she broke her wrist and damaged a nerve in her thumb while working as a stower. Like Shannon Allen and many other workers, she received the run-around in terms of compensation and treatment after her injury. She worked at a homeless shelter while she recovered from her injury, and she returned to work in November. After she was finally able to see a doctor, she was told that the nerve damage in her thumb had become permanent.

“This is for the ones that are working there now,” Jo says. “Think about this $2 raise you are getting. My health savings account is wiped out. I was trying to save up to go get my dental work. I had to pay for the doctor’s appointments out of my own pocket. I had to pay over $400 and I’m still not diagnosed, and I still don’t know if I have this virus or not. My next doctor’s appointment on Tuesday is going to be another $75, and if there is any medication prescribed that will be more.”

The $2 raise, Jo says, is totally out of proportion to the scale of the danger workers confront and the consequences they will face if they fall ill. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, says Jo, “does not care about his employees. I don’t even know if I get a check for sick pay after working there two years. And this is just what was already promised to me.”

The most important thing for Jo is the health and well-being of other workers at DFW7 and their families. At first, she says, she was concerned about herself. She has chronic bronchitis, and the coronavirus is a very serious threat to her health. She has been struggling with the symptoms, coughing and feeling sore, and taking strong medications that make her feel “shaky and old.” In addition, the bills are piling up, her health care savings are wiped out, and it is still uncertain whether she will receive her promised sick pay. “The landlady already put a notice on my door that I did not pay rent.”

However, what keeps Jo up at night is the thought of other workers being potentially infected. “I think about all the people I was in contact with. Many live at home with their elderly parents. Did they take it home? Did I infect them? Since I haven’t been diagnosed I don’t really know and I don’t want to frighten them. But don’t they have a right to know they could have been contaminated?”

“They are sitting there thinking our facility has no cases,” Jo said, referring to her coworkers. “There are no confirmed cases because they don’t test you. They only test you when you are in the hospital and you already have it bad. I feel guilty not knowing, and I feel guilty about all of them.”

“They are not doing this right,” she said, referring to management at her warehouse. “They are not communicating at all.”

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