

UPS Worldport employee in Louisville, Kentucky dies from COVID-19

Steve Filips
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On Monday, at a coronavirus press briefing, Kentucky Governor Andrew Beshear announced that a United Parcel Service (UPS) Worldport employee had died the previous weekend from what was apparently COVID-19. According to local media the veteran employee was Roml Ellis, age 55. It was also reported that he was not known to have had any underlying health issues.

As a company policy, UPS has refused to confirm any cases of COVID-19 infection or related deaths at its facilities citing “medical privacy laws.”

An extended family member who didn’t want their name released for fear of company retaliation told local media that the UPS employee had become infected with COVID-19 last month. The death has also been confirmed by the Clark County, Indiana Health Department.

The death of the veteran worker underscores UPS employees’ concerns over the lack of safety protections at the massive Worldport facility in Louisville. The company has dragged its feet on supplying hand sanitizer, rubber gloves, and only now will be finally supplying “select workers” with face masks, claiming a shortage. That only after the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) called for the use of facemasks Monday.

Local media reported that the deceased UPS employee was a supervisor, an over 30-year veteran, who resided across the border in Clark County, Indiana. Jerry McGovern, a friend of Roml Ellis and a retired UPS employee with 31 years told the press, “People are scared to hold UPS accountable.” He pointed to the UPS practice of transporting workers across the sprawling facility in vehicles where, “they’re putting 8-10 people in these vans.”

Teamsters Local 89 at the Louisville Worldport

facility has not issued a statement on the death of Ellis. This silence is doubly significant given that Fred Zuckerman, Local 89 president, is running for Teamster secretary treasurer as part of a supposed reform slate backed by the Teamsters for a Democratic Union that is challenging incumbent Teamster President James P. Hoffa.

Neither Zuckerman nor Local 89 have said anything about the refusal of UPS to provide information on COVID-19 cases. Meanwhile, Sean O’Brien President of Teamsters Local 25 in Boston, Massachusetts, the head of the anti-Hoffa slate, issued only a mild rebuke to UPS over its safety practices after reports surfaced that three UPS employees had tested positive for COVID-19 in the area at the end of March. One was a driver and two loaded trucks. O’Brien did not press for any follow-up action and the matter has apparently been dropped.

Bill Gray, of Lowell, Massachusetts, with over 30 years at UPS and the Teamsters told the local press that workers were forced to bring their own personal protective equipment to work because UPS failed to provide any.

There are over 20,000 UPS employees in the Louisville, Kentucky area mostly at Worldport, which is the company’s chief international air freight center. It processes some 2 million packages daily and 4 million packages per day during the peak holiday season.

While UPS cites privacy as a justification for not revealing information about coronavirus infections at its facilities, the impact is to deny employees access to vital information necessary to protect their health and safety. Management’s concern is not personal privacy but profits. In particular, they want to avoid anything that will increase workers’ demands for improved

working conditions.

Like Amazon and Walmart, UPS is implementing temperature checks of employees, one of the least costly ways of screening against potential COVID-19 infection. However, given the long incubation period in which those infected with the virus may not show symptoms, this is hardly an adequate precaution against spread of the disease.

In contrast to UPS management's claims of implementing important safeguards, a retired Worldport employee told ABC that he had spoken to numerous employees who were scared over the inadequate protections against COVID-19 infection.

A local ABC news affiliate reported, "We've received more than a dozen calls and emails into our newsroom over the past week, complaining of lack of protective gear, like gloves, and social distancing that's not enforced, mainly within company shuttles that take employees to and from the airport to sort packages."

Adding to the stress on UPS workers, Amazon has announced that it is suspending its two-year-old shipping service venture and will again rely on UPS and Federal Express (FedEx) for its shipping needs. The move was said to be partly sparked by the coronavirus-related surge in orders, and will no doubt add increased risk and burdens to the already overstretched workers at UPS, FedEx, and other logistics operations.

In addition to serving as a logistics center, the Louisville area has many thousands of workers employed at manufacturing operations including two Ford plants in Louisville and a large Toyota facility in nearby Georgetown, Kentucky. Both automakers have temporarily suspended operations, but are looking to restart production at the earliest opportunity.

Another major Louisville manufacturer, GE Appliance, is still in operation after the empty talk of a strike by the International Union of Electrical Workers-Communications Workers of America (IUE-CWA) over COVID-19 concerns. There are some 3,800 hourly workers at GE Appliance building ovens, dryers, stoves and refrigerators. The company is now owned by Haier, a multinational Chinese-based company where starting pay is \$14 per hour.

GE Appliance briefly suspended operations last month as COVID-19 cases multiplied, but has now resumed operations claiming the manufacture of

household appliances is an essential service. The move sparked outrage among workers, who resented being asked to risk COVID-19 infection for production that was clearly not immediately critical to the functioning of society.

After a little initial bluster, IUE-CWA dropped any talk of a strike and agreed instead to a few token gestures such as for workers to receive "appreciation pay" at a rate of an additional \$2 per hour, and allowing workers with vulnerable family members or health problems of their own a leave of absence until April that could be extended.

Management's "innovative" safeguards included temperature screening, staggered breaks and the installation of large plexiglass shields.

At another nearby facility, the Amazon SDF-9 returned apparel center in Shepherdsville, Kentucky, production was shut down March 28 after three employees had tested COVID-19 positive. According to workers who spoke to media, the nearby SDF-4 building would remain open.

Amazon said they were sanitizing the facility, and subsequently Governor Beshear allowed Amazon to reopen on April 1. Earlier in March, Amazon had made an announcement of its intent to expand their fulfillment centers in Kentucky and Indiana and add 4,500 employees.

Teamster UPS package truck loader John in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, spoke with *nymag.com*, and gave an indication of the added strain the large volume of shipments from Amazon is putting on UPS workers. He said, "Yes, it's pretty much just increasing every day. I've worked Christmas seasons that weren't this busy. And that's always our busiest time of year, a few weeks before Christmas."

Pointing to the extent of the spread of the coronavirus he said, "I overheard our building manager yesterday say we had about 20 call outs with COVID symptoms. So that's 5 to 10 percent of our total workforce at the building I work at, calling out."



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