

Five Michigan grocery and retail workers die from COVID-19

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The supermarket chain Kroger confirmed on Saturday afternoon that four of its employees in Michigan had passed away from the coronavirus. Ken DeLuca, President of the Michigan division of the company, which is headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio, reported that the employees worked at stores in Northville, Troy, Grosse Pointe, and Livonia, all in the Detroit metropolitan area.

A fifth retail employee who worked for the supercenter chain Meijer was also reported on Saturday to have died from COVID-19, although the specific store location was not disclosed by the Grand Rapids, Michigan-based company. A Meijer spokesperson said, “Out of respect for the team members and their families, we will not share any additional details and ask that you respect their privacy during this difficult time.”

Half of Meijer’s 242 stores are located in Michigan, with the other half in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio and Wisconsin.

In addition to the reported deaths, evidence is emerging that the pandemic is sweeping through the workforce of grocery and retail establishments, which have been kept open and identified as part of the critical infrastructure workforce in most states.

A leaked memo sent to workers for the delivery service Shipt last week reported Meijer stores in Cedar Springs, Grandville and Ann Arbor, Michigan had employees who tested positive for COVID-19. An official announcement stated multiple employees had tested positive, but a spokesman only confirmed the Cedar Springs case, no other locations were disclosed.

Cedar Springs, a town of 3,500 people north of Grand Rapids, is the location of an outbreak of coronavirus at a nursing home, owned by Metron Integrated Health Systems, where 31 residents have tested positive and

six have died from COVID-19 as of last week.

Due to fear of food shortages, long lines at crowded grocery stores have been common scenes across the country, exposing workers to hundreds of people per day. While some stores have provided gloves and masks, erected sneeze guards at checkouts, checked employee temperatures, and implemented other social distancing measures, official guidance has been slow to arrive.

Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer just recently published guidelines in her stay-at-home order extension issued last Thursday. These include limiting the number of customers based on store square footage and providing markings six feet apart to help with social distancing.

Michigan—and especially the Detroit area—has become a hotspot for COVID-19, with 25,635 confirmed infected and 1,602 dead, although the actual numbers are presumed to be much higher.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration released some recommendations but ultimately leave implementation up to the states and employers, putting countless people at risk. This has sparked outcry as grocery workers have been left to fend for themselves for weeks as the virus spread throughout the country.

As a result, deaths of grocery store workers from COVID-19 are becoming common. Two Walmart employees from the same store in Chicago, a 27-year-old Giant Food store worker in Maryland as well as a Trader Joe’s worker in Scarsdale, New York are among the at least 41 grocery workers who have died from the virus nationwide.

Vitalina Williams, a Guatemalan immigrant who lived in Salem, Massachusetts and worked two jobs, at a local Walmart and a Market Basket grocery store,

died a week after being admitted to the hospital for treatment.

The impact of the pandemic on those deemed essential workers by state governments has produced a wave of support from the general population, recognizing their work as critical to the functioning of society. Tributes to nurses, delivery drivers, and grocery store workers fill social media. Residents are tying colored ribbons to trees as signs of solidarity. A change.org petition asking for the standardization of safety precautions for grocery store workers has gathered 5,470 signatures.

“One of the biggest mistakes supermarkets made early on was not allowing employees to wear masks and gloves the way they wanted to,” supermarket analyst Phil Lempert told the *Washington Post*, “They’re starting to become proactive now, but it’s still going to be much tougher to hire hundreds of thousands of new workers. We’re going to start seeing people say, ‘I’ll just stay unemployed instead of risking my life for a temporary job.’”

With a patchwork of insufficient or voluntary guidelines in place, grocery stores and delivery services such as Shipt and Instacart have been on a hiring spree to meet increased demand. Walmart is hiring 150,000 workers and Kroger is hiring more than 10,000. To entice this low-paid section of the workforce to risk their lives, stores such as Kroger are offering temporary \$2 an hour “hero bonuses.” This does little to mitigate the stress and precariousness of the job.

A Kroger worker in Ohio reported that with all the new hires, higher paid workers with seniority are having their hours cut. Paid time off is only available after a year of employment, or if they’ve become hospitalized. She reported she was fired because she took time off to attend her grandfather’s funeral, even though she had permission. She has contacted her union every day but has gotten no response.

“They physically push their employees to do more than they’re capable of, and ridicule them if they don’t succeed,” the worker reported. “They don’t care about the mental or physical toll it takes. They want every little thing they can get out of you until they break you.”

A personal shopper at a Giant Food Store near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania said they’ve started implementing safety measures in the past couple

weeks, but the hours are long and the work is physically demanding. “I personally feel guilty for needing to run to the bathroom between shops. It’s stressful. There have been people yelling, both at other customers and employees.” Regarding paid time off if she gets sick, “I personally try not to think about all of that, as it gets far too stressful for me.”

The cynically named Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, passed by unanimous consent “voice vote” in the House, exempts companies with over 500 employees from providing paid time off if they get sick. Kroger’s 450,000 employees, as well as those at most regional and local chains, will be forced to choose between working when sick or being unable to pay their mortgage. The mother of Leilani Jordan, the 27-year-old Giant Foods worker who died, told the *Washington Post*, “She only stopped going to work when she could no longer breathe.”

Instead of taking a proactive approach to protect their employees while sales boom from the pandemic, grocery store chains, delivery services and companies like Amazon are attempting to pull in as much profit as possible regardless of the consequences. Workers who get sick are seen as replaceable, with millions of the newly unemployed available to take their place.

Facing difficult and dangerous working conditions, workers have begun to fight back. Instacart workers held a one-day strike March 30. Amazon workers have started walking off the job as their coworkers fall sick and die. In Andover, Massachusetts, Market Basket distribution center employees refused to enter the building April 10 because a worker tested positive for COVID-19 and the building hadn’t been cleaned.



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