

Amazon cracks down on rebellious workers as first COVID-19 fatality is reported

Tom Carter
16 April 2020

On Tuesday, *Business Insider* reported that the coronavirus claimed the life of an Amazon employee in California. This is first reported death of an Amazon employee from COVID-19.

Over the past week, Amazon has fired three workers who challenged the company's failure to ensure safe working conditions during the pandemic.

The deceased employee was an operations manager at an Amazon facility in Hawthorne, California. Amazon has revealed few details about the circumstances of his death. He was last at the facility on March 6, falling ill after a vacation that lasted from March 7 to 20. It is unclear how the disease was contracted. While the death occurred on March 31, it was not reported until April 14.

While management claims that workers at the Hawthorne facility were promptly notified, Amazon workers around the country received no notice of the death. There is little doubt that Amazon was concerned the release of the information would encourage further walkouts and job actions by workers.

Around the world, Amazon workers have walked out and protested the company's reckless indifference to their health in the midst of the pandemic. Workers risking their lives to ship essential goods to people sheltering in their homes have been compelled to work without adequate personal protective equipment and other measures necessary to ensure their safety.

Striking workers have demanding the closure of unsafe facilities, full protective gear and an end to the company's practice of deliberately concealing from workers information about the infection of their fellow workers.

So far, Amazon workers have fallen ill with the virus at more than 130 warehouses in the US, with some warehouses having over 30 confirmed cases.

Walkouts of Amazon workers have taken place in Detroit, in the New York City boroughs of Staten Island and Queens, at a facility in Chicago, and elsewhere. In addition, strikes have taken place in Italy and Spain.

Workers at the Amazon-owned Whole Foods, along with Instacart, recently walked out in the US to demand protective equipment, hazard pay, and sick pay. Parallel walkouts, strikes, and rebellions have taken place across many of the industries and services designated as "essential" during the pandemic, including meatpacking and public transit and sanitation.

Amazon's response to the growing insurrection has included providing cosmetic, cheap safety measures that are utterly inadequate in light of the scale of the danger. A worker at the BWI2 warehouse in Baltimore, for example, told the *International Amazon Workers' Voice* that one of the new safety measures consists of providing "safety sanitation" wipes, which workers are admonished to use sparingly.

A label on the side of the container reads: "Please use a wipe to sanitize your station at the start of your shift and when changing stations only. We want to ensure that we have enough for all shifts. DO NOT remove these wipes from their designated station."

In addition to these low-cost, minimal safety measures, Amazon has responded to the growing insurrection by stepping up the already-tyrannical regime in its warehouses. Workers report in particular that the new six-foot "social distancing" rule is being used to bully and harass workers who speak out and break up efforts to organize or hold discussions.

On Friday, April 10, Amazon fired UX (user experience) designers Emily Cunningham and Maren Costa, both of whom had garnered public attention for criticizing the company in relation to climate change

and had recently circulated a petition for safer conditions for workers during the pandemic. They had also attempted to set up meetings between tech workers and warehouse workers. The firing took place by telephone.

On Tuesday, Cunningham wrote on twitter: “Amazon fired me and @marencosta. As Mary Oliver wrote, ‘oh! how rich it is to love the world.’ It’s a gift to be able to fight for something you love so deeply.”

“Warehouse workers are under real threat right now,” she added. “I’m proud of all the ways they’re standing up for themselves and each other (and the public!). That takes real courage and integrity. If we don’t fight for each other now, when do we?”

The same day, Costa wrote: “@emahlee and I were fired on Good Friday by Amazon for fighting for our colleagues’ safety in the time of COVID.”

“Basically, we were fired for trying to make Amazon a better place—for trying to make the world a better place,” she continued.

Both Cunningham and Costa are leaders of Amazon Employees for Climate Justice, which was involved before the pandemic in walkouts of Amazon employees in open defiance of corporate directives, protesting the company’s ties to the US military and ICE terror squads, discrimination, conditions at the warehouses, and complicity in climate change.

Cunningham had worked at Amazon for five years, Costa for 15 years. In January, both Costa and Cunningham appeared in a two-minute video featured on Bernie Sanders’ Senate twitter account. They are scheduled to appear today in an online event with Naomi Klein, a Sanders supporter.

Management claimed: “We terminated these employees for repeatedly violating internal policies.”

The firing of Cunningham and Costa is aimed at intimidating all workers. Despite our differences with their political outlook, the *International Amazon Workers Voice* unequivocally defends these victimized workers and demands their immediate reinstatement.

Workers should also demand the reinstatement of Bashir Mohamed who was also fired for attempting to organize workers at his warehouse in Minnesota, where he had been demanding more effective safety measures. Amazon’s justification was that Mohamed was “terminated as a result of progressive disciplinary action for inappropriate language, behavior, and

violating social distancing guidelines.”

The alleged violation of “social distancing guidelines” was also recently used to target and fire Chris Smalls, who led a walkout at a Staten Island warehouse in New York to protest inadequate safety measures.

Amazon is a trillion-dollar global conglomerate best known for its online shopping and distribution service. Amazon’s CEO Jeff Bezos, the richest person in the world, has kept the company’s 750,000 workers at their stations during the global pandemic without adequate safety precautions. He told workers that they would have to wait for their “turn” for masks, while of course he did not wait for his “turn” to exploit the opportunity presented by the pandemic to secure an enormous profit for himself. Over the last month, an additional 80,000 warehouse workers were hired.

With millions of people sheltering in their homes during the pandemic, Amazon is experiencing a spike in sales through its online marketplace. Bezos saw an increase in his fortune, which he has previously described as his “Amazon winnings,” by around \$24 billion since the start of the year, including \$6.8 billion over the last week alone. His personal wealth is now estimated at around \$138 billion.



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