

Letter from Amazon CEO Jeffrey Bezos seeks to cover for efforts to exploit the COVID-19 crisis for profit

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In an annual letter to shareholders published Thursday, Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos, the world's wealthiest man, sought to present himself and his company as selfless corporate do-gooders, concerned only with the highest ideals of serving the public amid the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, which has claimed over 150,000 lives globally.

The letter, addressed "to our shareowners," comes amid a growing insurrection of Amazon workers demanding safe working conditions, paid medical leave, and personal protective equipment. Walkouts and strikes of Amazon workers have already taken place in Illinois, Michigan and New York, as well as Italy and Spain.

Workers have been kept at their stations amid the pandemic with minimal and inadequate safety precautions and have fallen ill at a majority of the corporation's United States-based warehouses. The company has treated the lives and well-being of its workforce in an openly callous manner, and now it is attempting to mitigate the damage to its image.

"One thing we've learned from the COVID-19 crisis is how important Amazon has become to our customers," Bezos' letter begins. "We want you to know we take this responsibility seriously, and we're proud of the work our teams are doing to help customers through this difficult time."

The work of "helping" customers during the pandemic has been very profitable for the world's richest man, who has recently gotten a lot richer. While workers risked their lives to keep the deliveries going, with many falling ill in the absence of adequate safety precautions, Bezos's wealth increased by a staggering \$24 billion since January.

As for Bezos's "pride" in "the work our teams are doing," the company's callous treatment of its workforce is a reality that cannot be covered up with a few empty phrases. Prior to the pandemic, to cite just one example, the *International Amazon Workers' Voice* uncovered a warehouse in Texas where hundreds of Amazon workers were being seriously

injured every year.

Workers reported abysmal conditions in warehouses around the country, including South Carolina, Texas, Maryland and California. Internationally, workers from Spain, Morocco, India, the United Kingdom and Australia denounced the conditions inside the company's warehouses.

Since the pandemic, workers have spoken to the IAWV about abuses in facilities in Texas, South Carolina and Pennsylvania. Workers described working without adequate safety gear, cosmetic and meaningless safety precautions, and the company reneging on promises to provide two weeks' paid leave to workers who were quarantined.

Bezos thinks this all this can simply be papered over with a single letter written by his public relations staff. "We are focused on the safety of our employees and contractors around the world," the multibillionaire writes, "we are deeply grateful for their heroic work and are committed to their health and well-being ... We've distributed face masks and implemented temperature checks at sites around the world to help protect employees and support staff."

Left out of his self-serving account is the fact that these largely cosmetic safety measures were implemented piecemeal and after substantial delay. Workers waited for weeks for protective equipment after the deadly outbreak was labeled a global pandemic by the World Health Organization. Meanwhile, the temperature checks will fail to detect asymptomatic workers, who play a large role in spreading the virus. For workers who already have a fever as a result of the deadly virus, it may already be too late.

In addition, what few cosmetic safety precautions Amazon has implemented were only a response to a wave of mutinies breaking out in its workforce, including walkouts staged by Whole Foods and Amazon warehouse workers.

Bezos's letter may make Amazon's wealthy investors feel better about themselves, but it will not fool workers, who have before their eyes dozens of cases of workers falling victim to COVID-19 at warehouses around the country,

management denying sick leave to quarantined workers, the absence of safety equipment, and workers who speak out against the abusive policies of the company being harassed and fired.

Sensitive to exposures of the company's practices of gouging customers for essential goods during previous crises, the CEO proudly states the company is now: "acting aggressively to protect our customers from bad actors looking to exploit the crisis. We've removed over half a million offers from our stores due to COVID-based price gouging, and we've suspended more than 6,000 selling accounts globally for violating our fair-pricing policies."

The company that risks the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers in order to boost profits, denies workers basic safety protections, and refuses to pay sick leave for quarantined workers is the biggest "bad actor" of them all, making the would-be price gougers seem like small potatoes by comparison.

According to *MSN*, "the letter ... offers a rare window into the thinking of the world's richest man and his plans for the company he founded. Bezos in recent years has rarely done media interviews or commented publicly on events."

Noting the woeful lack of testing for COVID-19 available to the population, Bezos proposes "a team of Amazonians ... dedicated ... to work on this initiative ... A next step in protecting our employees might be regular testing of all Amazonians, including those showing no symptoms," he states, acknowledging that "regular testing on a global scale, across all industries, would both help keep people safe and help get the economy back up and running."

Bezos says more than perhaps he meant to say. He writes that he "might," out of the goodness of his heart, provide testing for the workers who risk their lives every day to keep the billions pouring into his pockets. But what was intended as a charitable sentiment only reveals his callousness. He does not explain why a company sitting on a cash hoard worth tens of billions (or for that matter, the world's richest man himself), did not attempt to implement regular testing months ago.

At this point, one has no reason to doubt that any "testing program" that Bezos has in mind is motivated by the business and profit-making opportunities presented by positioning the Amazon conglomerate in front of a massive global demand for tests.

In an effort to patch up Amazon's battered corporate image, the Bezos letter spends an inordinate amount of time describing the company's charity and environmental work. Readers reminded of Amazon's "first signatory" status to "the Climate Pledge" and his company's "assistance" to various state and governmental organizations.

On the contrary, Amazon's entire business model is built

on extorting handouts from others. The company demands and receives billions in handouts from the federal and state governments in the US in return for "creating jobs." As for climate change, on April 10 the company fired user experience designers Emily Cunningham and Maren Costa, both of whom had been outspoken critics of the companies' policies in relation to climate change.

As John Adams famously observed, "Facts are stubborn things." No matter how much Bezos spends on public relations campaigns, his reputation and the reputation of the company itself have been irreparably damaged in the eyes of hundreds of thousands of workers.

Bezos's passages regarding the company's alleged charitable activities only underscore the fact that the Amazon conglomerate generates billions of dollars in profit, which are disposed of according to the whims of a single billionaire.

Amazon's conduct throughout the pandemic demonstrates the necessity of expropriating and transforming this essential infrastructure into a global public utility. In addition, whether or not Amazon workers have adequate safety precautions, testing and equipment cannot be left to the say-so of a single mega-billionaire, based on what he "might" (or might not) decide he wants to do.

Rather than allowing Bezos to expand his exploitative corporate model into every corner of the global economy, the world's working class must organize to exercise control over the distribution centers, logistics hubs, sorting warehouses and other essential components of the Amazon infrastructure, to direct the movement of commodities according to most pressing social needs, not private profit.



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