

More than two-thirds of US Amazon facilities may have had coronavirus cases

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An April 16 report by activist groups Athena and Hedge Clippers estimates that at approximately 75 of Amazon's 110 fulfillment centers in the United States, at least one worker has tested positive for the coronavirus. This figure indicates that the coronavirus has spread to more than two thirds of Amazon's warehouses. Considering the absence of systematic testing, the lack of adequate protection for employees and Amazon's refusal to track and report cases, the report likely underestimates the extent of infection at the company's facilities.

To draft their report, the groups, which are affiliated with trade unions and the Democratic Party, analyzed government health data and reports from local and national news sources. The analysis correctly notes that infection will spread dramatically in Amazon's warehouses in the absence of necessary protective measures. This spread will endanger the lives of Amazon's workers, Flex drivers, subcontracted delivery personnel and customers.

Other analyses have arrived at different figures. United for Respect, a group that calls for policy changes to improve conditions for retail workers, states that the coronavirus has been detected at more than 130 Amazon warehouses in the US. This number includes fulfillment centers and smaller hubs. Some warehouses have had more than 30 cases, the group reports.

The true number of coronavirus cases among Amazon workers is unclear, but it is undeniable that the virus has spread at an accelerating pace to facilities across the country.

On Sunday, an Amazon warehouse in Jeffersonville, Indiana reported its third confirmed case of coronavirus. On April 11, two more workers tested positive at a warehouse in Charlotte, North Carolina, bringing the total of cases at facilities in the area to

five. Recently, a worker reported the first confirmed case at his warehouse in Pennsylvania.

As would be expected, Amazon disputed the conclusions of the report by Athena and Hedge Clippers. "Since the early days of this situation, we have worked closely with health authorities to proactively respond, ensuring we continue to serve communities while taking care of our associates and teams," said Amazon spokesperson Kristen Kish in an interview with *Vice*. The record demonstrates that this statement is false.

As a public relations tactic, Amazon posted on its blog a list of steps it has taken to protect workers. The company boasts that it has distributed masks and has begun to check employees' temperatures using thermal cameras when they report for work. The company also claims to provide paid time off to patients diagnosed with the virus, although many workers say that they have not received it.

Amazon officials' statements aim to conceal the company's criminal neglect. The first case of coronavirus in Washington, the state where Amazon's headquarters is located, was reported on January 21. For weeks, the company did not provide gloves, masks or any kind of personal protective equipment to its workers. A full two months elapsed before CEO Jeff Bezos even mentioned masks in public. In a March 21 letter, the billionaire told his employees that they would have to wait their turn for masks.

Furthermore, checking workers' temperatures at the gate does not prevent transmission of the infection, since fever does not arise until days after infection. Workers who are infected but asymptomatic can unknowingly transmit the disease to their coworkers. The putatively benevolent practice of temperature screening also stigmatizes workers. It costs the

company next to nothing and is purely cosmetic, as are all the measures Amazon has taken so far.

A worker at an Amazon warehouse in Baltimore provided the *World Socialist Web Site* with a truer picture of the company's protective measures. Containers of sanitizing wipes recently appeared at the facility, each adorned with a notice that admonishes workers to "use a wipe to sanitize your station at the start of your shift and when changing stations only." The company's stinginess and the inadequacy of this measure would be laughable if the potential consequences were not so severe.

The worker also shared a photo of a wooden post to which two broken dispensers of hand sanitizer had been attached. One of the dispensers seemed in danger of falling from the post. A "high majority of these are either broken or empty," the worker said. "[It's] been this way for weeks."

These broken dispensers show what Amazon means when it claims to have made "ensuring the health and safety of its employees" its "top concern." In addition to being inadequate and largely token, these measures place the responsibility of avoiding infection on workers' shoulders. The implied message is that workers are dirty and must clean themselves before they are fit to work for the company.

Andrea Houtsch, who works at a fulfillment center in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, told local news that about three dozen cases of the coronavirus had been identified at her workplace. "Despite all of Amazon's talking points about our health and safety issues being top priority, the simple fact is that keeping the facilities open is in itself endangering workers' lives," she said.

This expanding public health crisis is a preview of what the whole country faces as President Donald Trump, presumptive Democratic candidate Joe Biden and other figures clamor for workers to be sent back to work.

These conditions have compelled workers to fight. Workers shut down the Amazon facility in Queens, New York and have walked out of the Staten Island, New York facility twice. This week, more than 300 workers are calling in sick at facilities across the country. In the tradition of the robber barons, Amazon has fired workers who organized strikes, and has even fired a worker who had simply planned to strike.

In the context of a historic pandemic, the company's

silence about infected employees is sinister and downright criminal. Workers may get infected while they are not on the job, but Amazon's negligence is increasing the risk of transmission at its warehouses and fulfillment and sortation centers. As Amazon's share price reaches an all-time high, workers are risking their health and their lives simply by showing up at these facilities.

The International Amazon Workers' Voice (IAWV), published by the *World Socialist Web Site*, urges all workers to build rank-and-file committees to demand that information about coronavirus infections at Amazon facilities are made available to all Amazon workers. Workers' rank-and-file committees must be independent of the trade unions and of activist groups affiliated with the Democratic Party, such as Athena, which received \$15 million in funding from billionaire George Soros' Open Society Foundation. These organizations oppose the independent mobilization of the working class, aiming instead to divert workers' anger into fruitless appeals to the capitalist class.

Workers must demand the immediate closure of all nonessential workplaces and the guarantee of full income to affected workers. Where essential work must continue, Amazon must ensure that workers receive the necessary protective measures, based on the best available medical evidence, to safeguard their health and lives.



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