

Sixty-eight Amazon workers fall ill with COVID-19 at Winsen, Germany warehouse

Marianne Arens
1 May 2020

Hardly any other company is profiting so massively from the coronavirus pandemic as the international logistics company Amazon, whose owner and CEO, Jeff Bezos, has increased his wealth to \$120 billion. While Bezos has amassed over \$25 billion during the pandemic, Amazon workers remain exposed to great danger many weeks after the pandemic began.

In Amazon's HAM2 Winsen distribution centre, located south of Hamburg, at least 68 of 1,800 employees were infected with COVID-19 by April 23, first reported in an April 23 article in *Manager-Magazin*. Only on that day did the management react by handing out masks to some workers.

Winsen is a new and ultra-modern site that's equipped with hi-tech robots. It should have the best conditions to establish workflows to ensure the safety of critical workers. Nevertheless, even at this location, workers are insufficiently protected.

Like everywhere else, Amazon allowed work to continue almost unrestricted during the lockdown, and the virus was able to spread unhindered. For a long time, workers were forced to work in highly unsafe conditions—without face masks, gloves, goggles or COVID-19 testing—and this has remained virtually unchanged to this day.

It was already known two weeks ago that “more than a dozen employees had fallen ill with COVID-19”, as the *Elbe-Geest* weekly reported on April 17. On March 25, a report by news weekly *Der Spiegel* said there had been at least three confirmed cases of coronavirus in the Winsen logistics warehouse. Management simply placed markings on the floors indicating social distancing, staggered the start and break times and used more plant buses than usual to take staff to the station in order to reduce overcrowding.

At the same time, the company implemented hourly

bonuses of two euros in Germany and Austria and 60 cents in Poland, in order to create an incentive for employees not to take sick leave. This contributed to the fact that many of those urgently in need of the money did not stay at home, even when they were already ill. When the Winsen facility opened two years ago, many unemployed people and refugees were hired, who are dependent on every euro.

Almost all Amazon employees are now worried that they could become infected and pass this on to their families. This is evident from letters received by the amazon-watchblog.de website and other media. Several employees anonymously criticise the fact that washrooms in the distribution centre are cleaned far too rarely. Crowds and congestion are still forming at the time clocks, turnstiles and entrance gates. Anyone who leaves the workplace a few minutes too early to avoid standing in line faces a deduction from their working time.

Amazon workers cannot rely on the service sector union Verdi in any way whatsoever. As employees from Winsen reported, management worked with the works council to conceal the first positively tested COVID-19 case in the dispatch centre for almost 14 days.

In order for Amazon to accept the introduction of a works council in one of its thirteen warehouses in Germany, Verdi officials dutifully comply with all of management's machinations. The attendance bonus of two euros per hour, which obviously contributed to the spread of COVID-19, was also approved by Verdi works council representatives. A member of the works council at the Leipzig distribution center told the newspaper *taz* that the works council had no conception of how to deal with coronavirus and was “waiting for the worst case” to happen.

A trial before the Wesel Labour Court revealed that even the surveillance cameras in the halls are operated with the consent of Verdi and the works council. Amazon had boasted that they would monitor the “social distancing” in the halls by surveillance camera, adding that the data would be transferred abroad and made anonymous.

Amazon Rheinberg’s works council had apparently successfully filed a complaint against this last step—the transfer of the data to servers abroad. In a report on the ruling, the court said that it “assumed that the transfer of the data abroad was contrary to the works agreement on the installation and use of surveillance cameras in force at the company.” It found that this “violated the works council’s rights of co-determination.” In other words, an agreement with the works council on camera surveillance had already existed for a long time.

The total number of the 13,000 Amazon employees in German logistics centres who have been infected by COVID-19 has not been established, because unlike the professional players in the German football league, and like all ordinary workers, they are only tested when acute cases are already causing a stir in their surroundings.

In the United States, Italy, France and Spain, several Amazon employees have already spontaneously refused to work, so as not to be exposed to the coronavirus danger. Through spontaneous strikes, they have also defended employees who had been dismissed for their brave protests. Following strikes in New York City, Chicago and Detroit, Amazon workers also stopped work in Minneapolis on April 27 to protest the firing of one of their colleagues. At least two Amazon workers in the US have already died of COVID-19, both in California.

In France, a court decision last week forced Amazon to temporarily close six shipping centres and clean them up because the risk of coronavirus infection affecting nearly 10,000 workers was so obvious. Previously, hundreds of Amazon workers in France had used their legal right to stay away from work if they were at risk.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its section in Germany, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), call on Amazon workers to join together in action committees independent of the unions like

Verdi, to fight together with Amazon colleagues around the world, for the following demands:

- Immediate cessation of operations in Winsen with full pay for all workers in quarantine! Full medical care for every single sick person, protection of the families and full financial security! Security for both refugees and temporary workers!

- Continuation of work at Amazon only for socially critical items, under conditions that guarantee maximum safety for the employees. It is necessary to equip every employee with personal protective equipment and provide regular tests for all.

- Regular cleaning of all distribution centres under the control of workers’ committees, which work independently of the company and trade union and are advised by reliable medical experts, virologists, etc.

The trillion-dollar corporation has all the means and possibilities to easily meet these demands, but as an Amazon worker in the US said, “The corporation only cares about profits, it doesn’t care about our lives.” Therefore, it is urgent that this vast network of distribution centres and be transformed into public enterprises and placed under the democratic control of the working class—without compensation for their owners and large shareholders. There is no reason why this wafer-thin layer of the super-wealthy should be enriched by the distribution of vital goods.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on all Amazon workers: Write to us, report on the situation in your distribution centre and expose the criminal indifference of management, the works councils and unions like Verdi to the coronavirus pandemic.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact