

US Amazon worker describes callous attitude toward safety as management reports \$75 billion in 2020 revenue

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As the COVID-19 pandemic enters its fifth month, many workers on the front lines are still without the basic safety protections necessary to protect them against the deadly respiratory disease. For millions, the inability of the world's most powerful governments and corporations to provide safe working conditions and basic necessities has exposed the rot of the capitalist system for all to see.

This contradiction finds one of its sharpest expressions at Amazon, a trillion-dollar conglomerate operated by the world's richest man, where workers have played a key role in the distribution of commodities to families sheltering in their homes. Late last month it was reported that nearly 75 percent of all Amazon facilities in the United States have reported at least one confirmed case. Since testing is not widely available and many cases are asymptomatic, no scientific estimate of infections at Amazon has been compiled to date. Undoubtedly, the numbers of confirmed cases are underestimations of the actual amount of sickness.

Following the initial COVID-19 infection reported at the company's Seattle headquarters in early March, the corporation, worth an estimated \$1.2 trillion in market capitalization, did next to nothing to protect its employees.

"When the first case [was recorded at Amazon], they showed us a video," said one warehouse worker in the US to the *International Amazon Workers Voice*. Preferring to remain anonymous, the worker spoke about the limited, inefficient and miserly efforts put forward by the company during the several critical weeks in March after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. "They were advising us to wash our hands, offering us sanitizers. They didn't make masks a big issue at first," he said.

Meanwhile, the state economy everywhere was shutting down at a rapid rate. "At first [in mid-March], they were closing schools, certain small businesses," he said. "For the first six hours or so [after management made us watch the video on health safety], I thought we'd be shut down, too."

"Then we got this paper saying that we were 'essential,'"

he noted. "I've been here for *years* and never heard them say that."

The decision to implement a few minor, cosmetic precautions occurred a month after the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) in late January. Amazon is a global commerce firm employing hundreds of thousands of workers and involving millions its operations, and the infection levels in many countries were already spiking. One might have hoped at the very least for a heightened level of concern and sensitivity to the dangers posed by the virus on the part of the corporation. This was not so.

"We started asking questions, 'shouldn't we be standing six feet apart?'" the worker said. "We were reporting all types of places [in the warehouses] where we'd been working together, all bunched up."

Amazon reported quarterly earnings of \$75.4 billion at the end of April. In a letter to investors, company CEO Jeffrey Bezos remarked, "We are inspired by all the essential workers we see doing their jobs—nurses and doctors, grocery store cashiers, police officers, and our own extraordinary frontline employees. The service we provide has never been more critical, and the people doing the frontline work—our employees and all the contractors throughout our supply chain—are counting on us to keep them safe as they do that work."

"We're not going to let them down. Providing for customers and protecting employees as this crisis continues for more months is going to take skill, humility, invention, and money," Bezos gushed. As the pandemic has forced millions to remain at home and forego essential trips outside, Bezos has profited handsomely, raking in over \$24 billion in personal wealth while his employees, declared "essential," were forced to work unprotected.

"What really insulted me was when I found out that Amazon was selling masks to the public, but not giving them

to us,” the worker told the *IAWV*. In late March, Bezos wrote employees directly in a “letter from our founder” on an internal company blog, callously asserting that company employees would have to “wait their turn” for masks and other protective gear. The letter came days after Amazon workers walked off the job at a facility in New York in response to a positive COVID-19 case detected there.

These walk outs occurred alongside a massive international strike wave of workers in the auto industry, who defied both management and union representatives to shut their facilities down rather than work in unsafe conditions.

During this initial period, Amazon management relaxed certain company policies. The company began suspending limits on unpaid time off (UPT), opting to hire new workers rather than attempt to force existing workers into the warehouse. The company also began allowing personal cell phones into the facilities. “The phones were supposed to be allowed in case of family emergencies,” they said. “I began asking why we weren’t being given masks, and that’s when they let us have cell phones.”

Inadvertently, the loosened restriction on phones led to workers filming and taking photos of the dangerous conditions they had been forced to remain working in.

“Someone took a picture, I didn’t actually see it, but I heard the photo got out of us working in close proximity,” he said. “It had to be done,” to expose what was happening.

“We were then told that the state government would be coming” to make sure Amazon was complying with the safety requirements. At the time, workers were reporting to the *IAWV* completely lax and unworkable “social distancing” measures at their facilities. “Amazon’s expectations are completely unrealistic,” the worker said, adding “it’s like the managers don’t even listen to you when you suggest improvements that can be made.”

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site’s* coverage of this global crisis.

Amazon “provides us with all these ways we can ‘speak up’ and be heard when it comes to reporting things, whenever there is a suggestion to improve things, but if it’s something they don’t like ... [the worker’s voice trails off].” The *IAWV* has previously written on Amazon’s internal reporting system, which encourages workers to spy and inform on one another. However, when such a system is used to point out the shortcomings of the company, the corporation seeks to silence its critics.

The company began limiting the number of workers in break rooms stationed around warehouses to two per table.

“I remember walking inside a break room and seeing all these chairs shrink-wrapped and saying, ‘what’s going on?’” the Amazon employee said. Before that time, the company did not bother requiring that workers wear protective facial masks or providing them with hand sanitizer.

“Now they have traffic cones set out on the main floor area, with little markers telling us to go ‘one way’ from A-side to B-side” in the warehouses. “Before, we would have ‘stand up’ meetings with management twice a day. Once the meetings stopped [due to social distancing], we stopped seeing our building’s general manager at all,” they said.

In early April, after a wave of walk outs among Instacart, Whole Food and Amazon workers, the company introduced a requirement for masks and thorough cleaning. “This was two weeks after the first case was reported *at my facility*,” they said. “At my site, they weren’t wiping down our stations. Only once in a while. It was like this until early April.”

“I’d asked PAs, Assistant Managers, everyone and would get no response. ‘What if someone else touches this right before me?’ I got no response. It’s even worse because I get moved around from station to station. That’s the way this company operates.”

It was previously reported that at this time that an unnamed worker at a warehouse in Hawthorne California became the first Amazon employee to die of COVID-19. Amazon did not report the death until mid-April.

Summing up their experience at Amazon, the worker told the *IAWV*: “This is the only company I ever went to work for and all its reviews were bad. And the funny thing is, all of the reviews were true! We’ve lost so many great workers over this B.S., I’m disappointed. I’m not interested in moving up in the company. I just say to myself ‘let me get my time in and then go home.’”

On May 1, Amazon returned to its company policy of strictly limiting the amount of times a worker can call out without being disciplined. The shift in company policy coincides with President Trump’s demand for the “re-opening” of the United States economy, a homicidal act under conditions where the COVID-19 pandemic not been contained, systematic testing is not being conducted, and there is no vaccine. “I give it two weeks,” the worker said. “There are some serious issues coming.”



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