

US grocery stores and retailers move to cut pandemic pay to workers

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Major grocery and retail corporations in the United States are preparing to eliminate the hazard-related bonuses given to their workers, including pay increases and paid work leave. The moves come as the number of new COVID-19 infections and deaths in the country continues to rise.

Throughout the pandemic, groceries and certain other retail outlets, as genuinely essential businesses, have continued to remain operational. These workers are under the constant pressure of potentially becoming infected by the virus, threatening not only their lives, but the lives of their families. Indeed, along with meatpacking workers, grocery and retail workers have emerged as one of the hardest-hit sectors by the virus.

This is due in part to the slow initial response among grocery and retail corporations to the outbreak of the virus. It was not until workers began to take action that these companies started providing masks, gloves, and sanitation products to their employees.

Now, the precarious position of grocery and retail workers is being exacerbated as states push forward with the reopening of their economies, which will only lead to the further spread of the virus.

This fact was made clear in the testimony of Dr. Anthony Fauci, the longtime director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and leading member of the White House Coronavirus Task Force on Tuesday. Speaking via videolink before the members of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee, Dr. Fauci noted that a premature reopening of states and counties would lead to “needless suffering and death.”

Under these conditions, the need to provide workers with protections and financial resources is more imperative than ever. However, the opposite is taking place, with Kroger, Starbucks, Whole Foods and others

planning to phase out bonuses within the coming weeks.

On March 31, Kroger announced an agreement with the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) to provide workers with a temporary \$2 per hour wage increase and additional emergency paid leave benefits. On Sunday, May 16, the company will stop paying this bonus.

By revenue, Kroger is the largest supermarket in the US, with \$121 billion in profits. The company operates nearly 3,000 stores nationwide and employs around 453,000 workers. Its portfolio includes chains such as Harris Teeter, Ralphs, and King Soopers. Last year, its CEO, Rodney McMullen, received a 21 percent increase in compensation, taking his annual income from \$11.7 million to over \$14 million. By comparison, the average hourly worker at Kroger makes \$10.53 per hour, and approximately \$21,902 annually.

The company has experienced numerous outbreaks of COVID-19 among its workers at locations throughout the nation. Most recently, it was reported on Tuesday that a worker at a Kroger in Murfreesboro, Tennessee died after contracting COVID-19.

On May 1, Los Angeles County, California health officials reported that 21 employees at a Ralphs in Hollywood tested positive for the virus.

A report by the *Los Angeles Times* found that the company has been incapable of ensuring that its employees have access to personal protective equipment (PPE). Rae Campos, who works as a cashier at the Hollywood Ralphs, said that the store has not been able to provide fresh masks or gloves after each shift. Campos had to resort to spraying her mask with disinfectant in order to use it the next day.

In an open letter published on the company’s website, Starbucks executive vice president and

president, Rossann Williams, indicated that the company is freezing its \$3 per hour pay bonus on May 3. The bonus was available only to the employees who risked coming in to work.

Whole Foods, owned by Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos, the world's wealthiest man, began offering \$2 bonuses to workers in April. The company plans to halt these payments by June 1. Expressing the total indifference to the lives of workers by the capitalist class, the CEO of Whole Foods, John Mackey, had previously suggested that workers "donate" their paid time off to coworkers who contracted the virus.

The retail giant Target, with 1,868 stores in the US, will stop paying its workers a \$2 bonus by the end of the month. Meanwhile, two workers at a Target in Visalia, California have recently tested positive for COVID-19.

To date, the UFCW has not issued any press releases in response to the moves by these companies to curtail workers' pay bonuses, nor has it made any attempts to organize workers in defense of their living standards and working conditions. Workers cannot rely on these bankrupt organizations whose only function is to better facilitate the exploitation of the working class at the hands of the corporations.

Grocery and retail workers must form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of unions, to wage a genuine struggle for protection from the pandemic guided by a socialist program. Those who are committed to this fight are urged to join the Socialist Equality Party, which carries forward the only genuine perspective for the working class in opposition to the capitalist program of endless profits, exploitation and death.



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