

More US grocery workers die from COVID-19

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Another grocery store worker died last week in Denver, Colorado, the second victim of coronavirus at the King Soopers supermarket chain. After news broke of the death of Randy Narvaez, who had been an employee of the company for more than 30 years, the local union and store officials revealed that 11 cases of COVID-19 have been found among other employees at the same outlet.

Narvaez's death came on the heels of an announcement by Kroger, the owners of King Soopers, that the company would be suspending "hazard pay" for workers—a \$2 bonus added to employees' hourly wage as compensation for working during the pandemic. Protests by workers led the company to replace the pay bump with one-time payments of between \$200 and \$400.

The same day the suspension of "hero pay" took effect, Kroger, the Cincinnati-based supermarket giant, filed a shareholder statement that shows a combined \$37 million paid to six executives in salaries, cash bonuses, stock awards and options, along with other compensation, in 2019.

By revenue, Kroger is the largest supermarket chain in the US, with \$121 billion in profits. The company operates nearly 3,000 stores nationwide and employs around 453,000 workers. 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. The average hourly wage of a worker at Kroger—after decades of wage concessions by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union—is \$10.53 per hour or approximately \$21,902 a year.

Kroger is expecting profits to be higher in 2020, as disruptions to supply chains have caused shortages and inflated food costs. Kroger sales increased by 30

percent in March 2020 before the full impact of the public health shutdowns, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and grocery prices increased by 2.6 percent.

A story published yesterday in the *Washington Post* reported that at least 100 grocery workers nationwide have died from the virus since late March, and at least 5,500 others have tested positive for the coronavirus.

Many grocery workers told the newspaper that, despite social distancing measures, they often share break rooms, bathrooms and devices for clocking in and out of their shifts. Protests by workers have forced local officials to press the supermarket chains for information and added safety measures, but company officials have dragged their feet.

Under pressure from the health department, Walmart closed a store in Quincy, Massachusetts for a week to clean it, and offered testing to every worker. Thirty-four employees at the location tested positive for COVID-19. At a Walmart in Worcester, Massachusetts, more than 80 employees were infected. According to federal lawmakers, more than 20 Walmart employees have died from COVID-19 across the country.

When surveyed by the *Washington Post*, Walmart, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods Market, Target, Kroger, BJ's Wholesale Club and Lidl declined to provide the number of workers who tested positive for the coronavirus or died from it.

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has said that it would not uniformly enforce the rules for reporting coronavirus cases except for employers in healthcare, emergency response, and corrections. New regulations going into effect this week give employers leeway in deciding whether a case is work-related and, therefore, reportable to OSHA.

The UFCW, which has 900,000 members working at the major food retailing chains, reports that in the last five weeks the number of infected or exposed workers has gone from 1,557 to 10,453.

Despite the spread of the virus, the UFCW has done nothing to advance workers' demands for protective gear and additional compensation and has instead worked to ensure that their members stay on the job. Jerry, a Kroger worker in southeast Michigan, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "As the number of cases climbs, management is reporting being overwhelmed by requests for medical leave. This has as much to do with the reckless policies of Kroger as with any natural spreading of the virus, including continuing to employ stockers during the day while customers are present, and not enforcing the wearing of masks by customers. I am increasingly concerned for the well-being of my coworkers. As more workers return to the factories, they will become new hot spots for outbreaks.

"The profit system, capitalism is to blame. The resources exist to sustain nonessential workers at home and create a vaccine, but in the current system these resources are being funneled to support big business and the financial oligarchy."

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party call on workers to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the trade unions, to protect the lives of grocery store workers and their families against the deadly conditions created by the corporate drive for profit.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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