

COVID-19 spreads, deaths rise in US following return to work

Marcus Day
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The coronavirus continues to run rampant throughout factories and workplaces in the US, even as federal, state and local governments are dispensing with any efforts to contain the pandemic, allowing businesses and economic activity to recommence.

All 50 states have begun lifting shutdowns, with more restrictions set to expire at the end of May, in one week. Deaths could double or triple in the next two months as a result, reaching 200,000 to 300,000 by the end of July, according to the latest models by researchers at the Imperial College London. “We find no evidence that any state is approaching herd immunity or that its epidemic is close to over,” the report warned.

Millions are increasingly confronting workplaces that have been transformed into death traps. Tens of thousands of workers have already been infected with the coronavirus at grocery stores, meatpacking plants, Amazon warehouses and other industries that have continued to operate during the pandemic. Public health experts have warned that large enterprises where workers labor in close quarters are more vulnerable to becoming “super-spreading” vectors for the disease, a risk which vastly increased with the restart of the auto industry last week.

The auto industry

Within just the first three days of the auto industry restarting and over 130,000 returning to work, new cases of COVID-19 were already confirmed at Ford’s Chicago Assembly and Dearborn Truck Assembly plants, and Lear Corporation’s seating plant in Hammond, Indiana, leading to multiple production disruptions at all three facilities. A worker reported to the *World Socialist Web Site* that a case was also confirmed at Fiat Chrysler’s Warren Truck Assembly Plant over the weekend, and others have previously reported cases, yet to be confirmed, at Magna Seating in Detroit and Fiat Chrysler’s FCA Toledo Jeep in Ohio.

Four workers had previously died from COVID-19 at Warren Truck, and at least 27 FCA, Ford, GM and Hyundai workers have died in the US overall.

As the WSWS warned, the temperature checks and other screening measures lauded by the companies, the media and the United Auto Workers union did nothing to prevent those who were unknowingly infected and contagious at Ford and Lear from working alongside their coworkers for several days.

“I go back on June 1, and I think it’s too soon to be going back,” a worker at the GM Components Holding parts facility in Grand Rapids, Michigan told the WSWS. “They’re telling us if we feel sick, we have to go home without pay. Before all this, we’d be sent home with pay, and they’ve changed it. If we’re sick, we’ve got to go into quarantine for 15 days. Does that mean we have to go without pay for 15 days? We still have to live. We’re coming into this building with no guarantees. I’m

terrified.”

The rapid emergence of new cases has already sparked renewed signs of unrest and opposition, with workers at the Ford Dearborn Truck Plant downing tools Wednesday after learning of a case at their factory.

The UAW has predictably responded not by admitting the return to work was premature, but rather by doubling down on its support for the grossly inadequate “safety protocols” worked out with the companies, attempting to convince its members to continue working. Speaking like a company spokesperson, UAW President Rory Gamble said in an interview with WWJ radio Friday, “The first couple days went better than expected. We expected a few glitches along the way. We feel we have a really solid system in place; we’ve just got to tighten up controls on the application of it.”

Grocery stores

The coronavirus pandemic has continued to ravage workers at grocery stores, the vast majority of whom have been laboring on poverty wages and without sufficient protective equipment.

Roughly 100 grocery workers have died from the virus and at least 5,500 have tested positive, according to an analysis by the *Washington Post*. Over 10,000 workers have either been infected or exposed to someone who has the virus, according to the United Food and Commercial Workers union.

A number of grocery store chains have launched advertising campaigns promoting their “service to communities” and piously celebrating the bravery of workers, attempting to conceal the dark reality of unsafe conditions, low pay, coverup of cases, and victimization of critics.

“People are suffering, people are dying, and they want us to dress up as superheroes,” Raquel Salorio, a longtime worker at the Southern California grocery chain Ralph’s, told National Public Radio. “Our jobs matter, but our health matters more.”

In a slap in the face to workers, some 40 grocery stores chains, including Kroger, one of the country’s largest, and its subsidiaries, will also be ending their hazard and “hero” pay raises and bonuses for workers at the end of the month.

The *Washington Post*, owned by billionaire Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, whose company also owns Whole Foods, reported over the weekend that a number of health officials have struggled to get grocery companies to accurately report data on new cases.

“We have had consistent problems with Walmart,” a local health official in Massachusetts wrote to the state’s attorney general’s office. “They have a cluster of COVID cases among employees and have not been cooperative in giving us contact information or in following proper quarantine and isolation guidelines.”

Meatpacking plants

Explosive new outbreaks have emerged at meatpacking plants in recent days, underscoring the homicidal character of Trump's executive order mandating that meatpacking plants remain open.

Last week it emerged that nearly 600 workers at a Tyson chicken plant in Wilkes County, North Carolina tested positive for the virus, out of a total workforce of 2,224. The company shut just two of three facilities at the complex for deep cleaning after the results emerged.

Most of the workers who tested positive reportedly showed no symptoms, in yet another indication of the insufficiency of temperature checks and other screening measures.

Also last week, an eighth worker died at the JBS meat processing plant in Greeley, Colorado, one of the first such plants in the US to experience a major outbreak. The plant has the state's largest cluster of cases, 366.

As of May 21, there have been at least 15,800 COVID-19 cases tied to the meatpacking industry, affecting 193 plants in 32 states, and at least 63 deaths among workers, according to tracking by *USA Today* and the Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting. The outbreaks have significantly contributed to the rapid increase in new cases in rural areas, which are generally poorer and have even greater lack of health care resources.

Amazon

An eighth known death of an Amazon worker due to COVID-19 was reported last week. The woman was employed at an Amazon warehouse, CLE2, in North Randall, Ohio, near Cleveland.

Amazon has refused to disclose publicly the number of cases at its plants. "We don't think that number is super valuable," said company spokesperson Lisa Levandowski.

Like many grocery companies, Amazon is ending its \$2 an hour raise for workers at the end of the month. "With demand stabilized, next month we'll return to our industry-leading starting wage of \$15 an hour," an Amazon spokesperson announced. "We're proud that our minimum wage is more than what most others offer even after their temporary increases in recent months, and we hope they'll do the right thing for the long term and bring their minimum pay closer to ours."

While cutting his workers' pay back to the bare minimum, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos has raked in unimaginable sums of money. His fortune has grown \$30 billion over the past two months, a 26 percent rise, reaching an obscene \$146.9 billion as of Friday.

The criminal indifference to workers' lives and safety by the super-rich, the corporations, the Trump administration and every level of government has provoked widespread anger and opposition, with over 220 strikes since March 1, according to *Payday Report*. The vast majority of the job actions have been launched independently of the pro-corporate trade unions, which have been focusing their efforts on justifying the companies' decisions to continue operating and endangering workers.

Far from responding to protests by providing workers with adequate protective equipment, carrying out mass testing, or implementing serious safety measures, employers have instead sought to stamp out the growing wave of struggles by firing and victimizing outspoken workers—including at Amazon, Target, Dollar General and elsewhere—encountering no significant opposition from the unions.

Meanwhile, the organizations and regulatory agencies nominally tasked with overseeing workplace safety, such as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), continue to demonstrate that they function as little more than arms of the companies. OSHA has failed to issue a single COVID-related citation to an employer since the start of the pandemic.

To protect against both the pandemic and the retribution of the companies, workers must take matters into their own hands and build new organizations: rank-and-file factory safety committees. As the Socialist Equality Party wrote in its statement last week, "These committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, should formulate, implement, and oversee measures that are necessary to safeguard the health and lives of workers, their families and the broader community." Such committees will take up as their objectives:

- Control work hours and line speed
- Guarantee personal protective equipment
- Ensure safe and comfortable working conditions
- Enforce regular testing
- Demand universal health care and guaranteed income
- Ensure the distribution of information
- Ensure job security

Workers are confronting not just the indifference, negligence or viciousness of their individual employer, but rather the catastrophic failure and bankruptcy of an entire economic and political system—capitalism—which subordinates all considerations and important decisions to the profit interests of the financial oligarchy. The struggle for safe working conditions and resources to combat the pandemic is at the same time the struggle to break the dictatorship of the ruling elite over economic and political life, i.e., the struggle for socialism.

The call for rank-and-file committees is eliciting growing support among workers. Tonya, a worker at Fiat Chrysler's Jefferson North Assembly Plant (JNAP) in Detroit, told the WSWS, "We have to form rank-and-file safety committees. We can't rely on the union to have our backs. They've shown they side with the companies and don't care about our well-being.

"It's too soon to reopen the economy. This virus may never go away, but it can be more contained. We all should be tested.

"They want more people to die. Trump doesn't give a damn and [Michigan] Governor Whitmer bowed to the corporations. They're not trying to prevent death. They're only interested in making money and opening back up. Now they are blaming China, which did more to contain COVID. This is damage control. Trump withheld information and thousands died. Workers see this talk about China is to cover up for all the deaths.

"Rank-and-file safety committees are necessary and needed. They will be widely welcomed by workers to protect us and our families."

Ron, a worker at Fiat Chrysler's suburban Detroit Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP), said, "It's too soon to go back into the plants. The safety measures they put in place are not adequate. That's why we need rank-and-file safety committees that focus primarily on our safety and well-being. We cannot rely on the UAW.

"It is time that workers take back our own power. Nothing moves without us. We cannot let the government and the companies sacrifice our safety for the benefit of billionaires and the stock markets. We're busting our butts in these plants, and you have to be safe and be sure that you're not bringing a deadly virus home to your children.

"The committees will catch the wind, and workers will join the movement for them because we're not just numbers, we're way more. We have to put consistent energy into this to change the tide. At the end of the day our lives shouldn't be disregarded for money. We have to ask, 'Who benefits and who doesn't?' We, the workers, have to defend ourselves."



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