

Local television stations broadcast fake news stories scripted by Amazon

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29 May 2020

Amazon provided edited and scripted news reports to nearly a dozen local news stations ahead of Amazon's annual shareholder meeting Wednesday.

The public-relations video/script routine aired on at least 11 different news programs throughout the United States. At these stations, reporters read dutifully from scripts handed out by Amazon, without disclosing they were repeating verbatim text that had been fed to them by the company.

Amazon confronts an insurrection in its workforce and widespread public outrage for keeping workers at their stations during the pandemic without adequate safety precautions, while at the same time piling up colossal profits.

The company's fake news broadcasts turned reality on its head, presenting Amazon as a paragon of concern for workers' safety. In nearly a dozen localities, reporters faithfully mouthed pre-packaged one-liners such as:

- "Amazon has transformed its global operations in response to COVID-19 to protect its employees."
- "The company is keeping its employees safe and healthy."
- "It has spent 800 million dollars on increased wages and overtime pay during the pandemic."

These fake news broadcasts aired in Miami, Florida; Nashville, Tennessee; Bluefield, West Virginia; Lexington Kentucky; Columbus, Georgia; Palm Springs, California; and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

The segments dishonestly introduced Todd Walker, an Amazon Public Relations manager, as an independent reporter uncovering the "unprecedented

ways" Amazon is tackling the COVID-19 crisis by innovating in the workplace.

The propaganda broadcasts then proceeded into staged responses by highly-paid managers. Marty Kuhl, site leader at an Amazon Fulfillment Center, says: "I was extremely proud of our team and how they handled the situation on a daily basis. Every day they were coming into work ready to embrace change." Walker even provided a plug for Heather MacDougall, Amazon VP of Worldwide Workplace Health & Safety, saying "we are doing more than any other employer that I know. I am super proud of the work that we've done."

Walker said on his LinkedIn page that he "got to dust off my reporting skills to give local markets their first look inside our fulfillment centers to see how Amazon is protecting the health and safety of its associates to continue delivering for you."

At the same time as these fake news broadcasts were being aired, Amazon was actively covering up the number of workers infected and dead from the virus, refusing to disclose these numbers to the public or to public health officials.

Last Friday, the *Guardian* reported that at least 32 employees have tested positive for the virus at two warehouses in Wisconsin. A health official for the county said, "To date, the Kenosha County Division of Health has struggled to receive coordinated cooperation from Amazon regarding the handling of COVID-19 cases," threatening to shut down the warehouses if Amazon does not fully cooperate with state testing and contact tracing.

According to Amazon worker Jana Jumpp, who has been working to compile these statistics, at least 900 workers have tested positive and at least 8 workers have died at Amazon workplaces since the start of the pandemic. The true numbers are likely substantially

higher. As a direct consequence of Amazon's callous indifference to workers' lives, over 75 percent of Amazon facilities have reported cases of the virus.

Amazon expects its workers to continue showing up to work until they get sick. When a worker tests positive for the virus, a text message is sent out that unfailingly ends with the boilerplate phrase, "we continue to take measures to keep you safe."

Corporations often pay news stations to air company-provided content for the sake of promoting themselves. "The practice has been criticized because it may not be clear to viewers" that the segment was produced by a company, states *CNBC* mildly.

Madison, Wisconsin-based reporter A.J. Bayatpour indicated that Amazon had approached his station with the video but executives "made clear that this is not something that we should run." According to Bayatpour, "the Amazon segment stood out because it included a script, 'all the way down to the anchor toss.'"

At the end of this month, Amazon is terminating its small increases in wages—\$2 per hour and double overtime pay—for workers. The company has already shelved its policy of unlimited unpaid time off, forcing sick workers back into the warehouses. With these measures, behind all of the concern for workers' safety it mouths in its propaganda videos, the company makes clear where it really stands.

The *International Amazon Workers Voice* spoke to Amazon workers this week about the real conditions inside Amazon's warehouses and about management's contradictory and callous attitude to safety.

"Sometimes you have to break [previously established] safety rules just to accommodate the new social distancing ones," an Amazon worker in Maryland told the IAWV by telephone.

The worker, who preferred to remain anonymous, referenced the haphazard and inadequate procedures introduced at Amazon during the pandemic. "For instance, the procedures for lifting pallets," the worker said. "We can't do that by ourselves, and we aren't allowed to do that with teams" with social distancing in effect.

"I've seen safety officers break the rules they're trying to enforce," he added. "I've even had to call out our safety manager because they've gone against the rules."

Another worker, who also chose to remain anonymous, called on workers to "know their rights." The demand for a safe work environment was "not asking for much. I'm honestly surprised we don't have rules like these in place already."

Workers interviewed by the *International Amazon Workers Voice* described empty hand-sanitizer stations, crowded workspaces as workers rush to meet the pace set by the company, and ad-hoc remedies by management such as cardboard walls called "bufferboards."

Amazon has a long record of contempt for workers' safety. Amazon was listed on "The Dirty Dozen" list maintained by the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health (National COSH) in both 2018 and 2019, which described Amazon as a company that puts "workers and communities at risk due to unsafe practices." Less than a year ago, the IAWV exposed a warehouse in Texas where 567 workers were injured over a two-year period. So much for the company's supposed commitment to safety!

"Workers need a guiding light," an Amazon worker in Maryland said, endorsing the demand for independent rank-and-file safety committees. "People want change but they are taken advantage of. They know that Bezos doesn't care about their safety, they know that the President doesn't care. They both only care about money."

"The rank-and-file demands are on point," the worker said, referring to the May 21 statement published on the *World Socialist Web Site*. "I think you can add a few more."



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