

As company becomes world's most valuable automaker

Six Tesla workers test positive for coronavirus at Bay Area factories

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This week, Tesla reached two milestones. First, the electric automaker's market capitalization surpassed Toyota on Wednesday, making Tesla the most valuable auto company in the world. Second, less than a month after Tesla reopened assembly facilities in Fremont, California, the company has reported its first COVID-19 cases, with at least six employees testing positive for the virus.

The potential exposure of thousands of Tesla workers to the virus is an entirely predictable outcome of the company's profit-driven decision to prematurely reopen in brazen defiance of local public health restrictions.

The first two cases were reported by anonymous workers in an interview with the *Washington Post*, published June 9. These cases were reportedly in the company's seat assembly facility, close to the main manufacturing plant, with one worker on morning shift and one on evening shift.

Four more cases at the main Model S/X factory were then reported by an anonymous worker to the *Electrek* industry news website, bringing the likely total of reported cases in Tesla manufacturing facilities to six. Alameda County rules only require Tesla to report cases among county residents. Many Tesla workers commute long distances from different counties, suggesting that this is likely an undercount. In addition, Tesla did not test workers prior to reopening and is only required to report new cases to the county.

Tesla "production associates," i.e., factory workers, make about \$20 an hour, ranging from \$14-23 an hour, according to Glassdoor.com. With a 40-hour work week, 50 weeks a year, this is \$40,000 a year or \$3,300 a month, barely more than the monthly rent of a two-bedroom apartment in Fremont, where the factory is located. Shifts are generally between eight and 12 hours, with 35 minutes for lunch and two 10-minute breaks scattered arbitrarily throughout the day. Workers report not knowing a day's schedule until they arrive for work. These are the low-wage jobs for which Tesla workers are being asked to risk their lives.

Tesla's strongarming of local government is a case study in corporate interests overriding public health concerns with the full support of the federal government. The factory re-started

production on May 11, two days after Tesla sued Alameda County for extending lockdown measures somewhat longer than the state-level guidelines due to elevated local case levels. Tesla CEO Musk openly aligned himself with the Trump administration's drive to open the economy, with Trump personally tweeting in defense of reopening Tesla.

After Musk threatened to move production out of California, local and state officials prostrated themselves and have allowed Tesla's reopening to proceed essentially without impediment, with only token safety measures. After the decision, Governor Gavin Newsom gushed of his "great reverence" for Musk.

Although Tesla has announced plans to maintain physical distancing on the line, limit contact in break rooms and stagger shifts and breaks for its roughly 10,000 employees, there is essentially no enforcement. The Fremont Police Department claims to have performed some initial random compliance inspections of facilities, although no workers who have spoken to the press report seeing such inspections. However, the department has abandoned even this cosmetic measure and has been reportedly pursuing compliance enforcement only on a complaint basis since mid-March.

"It's like nothing but with a mask on," said one of the workers who spoke to the *Washington Post*. When the plant was reopened on May 11, safety measures included hand sanitizer, temperature checks and masks. An initial 20-minute grace period instituted to prevent contact between shifts was shortened to 10 minutes after only a few days. All of these measures, even if enforced, are completely inadequate.

The SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes the COVID-19 disease, spreads largely through airborne transmission, including from aerosol microparticles that can remain suspended in air for extended periods of time. Thus, in spaces with poor air circulation, such as Tesla factory floors, physical distancing has only a limited ability to slow the spread of the virus. One infected worker on the floor has the potential to expose countless others on a shift. This may even be the case for asymptomatic workers, as was illustrated by the World Health Organization's recent admission that the likelihood of such transmission is still unknown.

Workers report that even Tesla's cosmetic safety measures are not being enforced, in keeping with the company's abysmal safety record, which is worse than many slaughterhouses and sawmills.

"They pretty much say that this is a personal responsibility" for physical distancing in the factory, said a worker who spoke to *SF Weekly*. "Everyone's just mixing around. There's really no organization."

"This is a life and death situation," they continued. "There's really no room, and this is a factory with recycled air. You're basically just breathing on each other." Many workers are not wearing masks, they said, to ease breathing either during or after strenuous labor.

Tesla CEO Musk has repeatedly downplayed the danger and severity of the pandemic, while denouncing lockdown measures—which epidemiologists say have saved tens of thousands of lives in the US alone—as "fascist."

In his latest attempt to sow disinformation around the pandemic, Musk recently denounced Amazon for allegedly refusing to allow sales of electronic versions of a self-published book by former *New York Times* reporter and outspoken COVID-19 "lockdown critic" Alex Berenson. Amazon has since allowed sales of the book, claiming that its previous absence from the online store was due to a technical error.

Workers report that those who tested positive for the coronavirus have been instructed to remain home, while those quarantined due to possible exposure have returned to the line. It is unclear whether they were tested before doing so.

Tesla cashed out workers' paid time off (PTO) in March, claiming this was to comply with California law on extended leave due to the shutdown, according to an *SF Weekly* interview with Tesla worker Carlos Gabriel. The move leaves workers without PTO, further pressuring them to remain on the job in unsafe conditions. Although Tesla touts its current unlimited voluntary time off policy, Gabriel and others rightly suspect that those who take time off will likely face retaliation.

Thus, Tesla workers are faced with a "choice" between staying on the job and risking infecting themselves and their families, attempting to survive with no income in one of the most expensive parts of the country, or trying to find another job amid depression-level unemployment. The Trump administration has made clear that it will do everything to shield companies from being held accountable for COVID-19 infections among their workers. Meanwhile, an increasing number of state governments have encouraged employers to report workers who refuse to work during the pandemic so that their unemployment benefits can be denied. Despite this, an estimated 5-10 percent of Tesla's workforce have opted not to work.

Musk's breakneck campaign to restart production, no matter the cost in human lives, is driven by both his material interests and those of the financial oligarchy as a whole. In early May, Musk's compensation package, determined by Tesla's board

of directors, including fellow billionaire Larry Ellison, granted Musk 1.69 million stock options, currently valued at \$730 million, as a reward for keeping Tesla's average market value above roughly \$100 billion for six months. Thus, Musk was strongly encouraged by the Wall Street speculators who determine stock prices to take measures such as a premature reopening to maintain a high stock price.

Musk's fortune has *doubled* since October last year as a result, rising from roughly \$19 billion to over \$43 billion as of Wednesday, making him the 31st richest person in the world, according to *Forbes*.

Although Tesla's facility is not unionized, autoworkers at unionized plants across the US face essentially the same conditions. Although the United Auto Workers union maintains a formal grievance process for health, safety, and labor law violations, the general response of union bureaucrats is to dismiss workers' complaints and say "the company can do that."

To protect their health and the lives of themselves and their families, Tesla workers must form rank-and-file safety committees, democratically controlled by the workers themselves in opposition to the corrupt official trade unions. Tesla workers must form lines of communication with like-minded workers across the auto industry and among their brothers and sisters in other sections of the working class, as well as among the emerging protest movement against police brutality and racism.

For Tesla workers to secure a safe workplace, with sufficient pay and benefits, along with every other democratic and social rights, the wealth of the corporate and financial elite must be expropriated and redirected to the working class, and the auto industry placed under workers' collective control and ownership, as part of the struggle for socialism.



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