

Amazon workers describe spread of COVID-19 at warehouse in Romulus, Michigan

George Kirby
20 August 2020

COVID-19 is spreading at Amazon's DTW1 fulfillment center in Romulus, Michigan. Wayne County, Michigan, where the warehouse is located, is the state's epicenter for the virus, with 29,242 confirmed infections and 2,841 deaths as of this writing.

In April, Amazon workers throughout the country and internationally carried out walkouts and other actions demanding the closure of facilities, full protective gear and an end to the company's practice of concealing information about the spread of the virus. Meanwhile, Amazon has made money hand-over-fist during the pandemic, thanks to the surge in online sales as people avoid unnecessarily leaving their homes. The online retail giant doubled its net profit in the second quarter to \$5.2 billion, and CEO Jeff Bezos, already the wealthiest human in history, has seen his wealth surge to \$197.8 billion, including a \$13 billion increase in a single day.

Two workers from DTW1 spoke to the WSW International Amazon Workers Voice to denounce the continuation of work despite rampant infections. Their names have been changed in this article to protect their anonymity.

"The MSDT [Mask Social Distance Team] just walk around yelling at people all day," Katie says. "We have cases on almost an everyday basis."

She explained as the pandemic wore on, MSDT, the group within the facility response for enforcing safety measures, became a means of harassment and intimidation of workers by management.

"They [MSDT] started at the beginning of the pandemic, but they were about just safety then. But for the past couple months, they think they have some type

of power now so they feel they can just yell at people for trying to catch a breath for a second. It's impossible to stay six feet from each other in there. Amazon's working conditions are very poor.

"Having to wear these masks for the amount of time we do and in the heat; sometimes it's like 130 degrees in there, it causes breathing problems. People are passing out, having bad headaches, feeling nauseous and feeling like they are going to vomit. To say the least, it's not a great company to work for. They don't care about you or other people, because they can replace you the same day. The air conditioning doesn't work, and [the fact that there are] thousands of people in the building doesn't help."

University of Florida researchers have recently confirmed that the coronavirus can travel by air for much further than six feet, especially in enclosed and poorly-ventilated spaces. "It doesn't surprise me honestly," Katie says.

"I don't even want to be there anymore. I used to like Amazon, but now they just have really showed that they don't care one bit for their employees."

Stephanie described the inadequate social distancing and temperature checks in the plant. According to the World Health Organization, temperature screenings by themselves are not effective to stop the spread of the virus, since infected individuals may spread the virus long before they develop symptoms.

"There is a thermal temperature check and if you don't have a mask, they give you one. [But] the thermal temperature check is useless because someone was allowed in with a fever."

She explained that if workers are not feeling well, they would get three excused days to get tested.

However, she gave an example in which this procedure was not followed.

“The people that look at the temperature told a worker he was good to go in. He stopped and asked what the temperature was, and they responded, ‘you’re fine.’ They did the temperature check from six feet and said he was good. A supervisor got his temperature from a closer distance and it was over 100. So he finally was sent home. From what I have heard a few people have done this and were told they were allowed [inside].”

Stephanie was asked if workers were made aware of cases in the plant, she provided two text messages from the company. She responded by providing screenshots of company notifications of confirmed cases in the plant. The email notices were sent five and nine days after the infected workers’ latest shift at the facility. They provide no information about where these people worked or how many people were potentially exposed.

“The cleaning crew, they don’t clean. They spray a rag, wipe the rails at your station, then go to the next one. They don’t use a different rag or spray it again. The bathrooms don’t get cleaned. Some sinks don’t even work. There is no type of air flow whatsoever. You have to be there for sometimes 5-6 hours before you even get your first break.

Stephanie spoke on how workers continue to stay home because the cleaning crew does not clean. Due to many workers not coming into work, Amazon DTW1 continues hiring.

“They are still hiring everyday almost 90 people a day, which crowds the building. They keep calling mandatory [overtime] on us. Day crew comes in an hour early and night crew has to stay an hour later, so two shifts are in the building at the same time.”

Stephanie described her anxiety over the rush to re-open schools. “That is a huge problem with me. I have three kids that all have to be taught online. I will already be at work before they start and won’t be off until three hours after their school session is over. I can’t work around this. I have to choose between working and helping my kids transition with school.

“Where my kids go to school, the choice is to do online or face-to-face [instruction]. The first month everyone is online, but we had to choose what our children would do for the rest of the semester. I chose online for my kids because my youngest has bad

asthma and bad allergies, she gets sick very easily. I will not send her to school during these times or force a mask on my kids because I know it’s hard to breathe.”

Stephanie said she supports the statement, published last week on the World Socialist Web Site, of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee statement, “Prepare a nationwide general strike to stop the deadly reopening of schools! Form independent rank-and-file safety committees of educators, parents and students!”

To carry out a fight against Amazon’s deadly policies, Amazon workers must follow the example of teachers and autoworkers and form rank and file safety committees of their own. These committees will demand that workers themselves, in consultation with independent medical experts, have the right to establish real safety measures in the warehouses, uncontaminated by corporate profit interests. This includes the right to collectively refuse to work and close the fulfillment centers in the event of an outbreak of working conditions are unsafe.

For help setting up a safety committee at your own site, contact the World Socialist Web Site’s International Amazon Workers Voice.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact