

# Nearly 20,000 US Amazon and Whole Foods workers have been infected with COVID-19

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On Thursday, the management of Amazon quietly revealed in a blog post that 19,816 employees in the US, including warehouse and Whole Foods workers, have tested positive for COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic.

This revelation follows months during which the management evaded, ignored and refused to meet demands by rank-and-file workers for the release of this information.

In a statement on April 23, the *World Socialist Web Site's International Amazon Workers Voice* urged workers to form rank-and-file committees to demand the release of infection statistics at Amazon as a question of basic safety, pointing out that the company “systematically refuses to provide information to workers as to the number of cases” of workers who have gotten sick.

In the intervening months, workers who demanded this information were variously told that management did not track the information at all, that management could not answer workers’ questions because of HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) or other laws, and that management was supposedly concerned for workers’ privacy. Workers were told that the total number of infections was not “particularly useful,” but that Amazon’s safety precautions in the warehouses were “working” and “paying off.”

In May, Amazon senior vice president of global operations Dave Clark claimed—despite working for a company that tracks every second of every worker’s day in a warehouse—that he did not know the total number of infections. In an interview on CBS’s *60 Minutes*, Clark also said, “I don’t have the number right on me at this moment because it’s not a particularly useful number.”

In May, a dozen state attorneys general demanded that Amazon disclose the total number of infections, but Amazon refused to make that information public.

While hiding the true number of infections, Amazon claimed that its countermeasures to the virus were “working” in the warehouses. Amazon spokesperson Lisa Levandowski told *CNN Business* in May that “our hard work around social distancing is paying off,” implying that

workers were safe from infection.

Now that it suits the company to release the information on its own terms and at the time of its choosing, it turns out that all of the excuses that workers were given were lies.

With management refusing to disclose basic data necessary for employees’ safety, workers attempted to gather the data themselves on social media, with one count reaching 2,000 cases. Former Amazon worker Jana Jumpp, who was interviewed in June on the *World Socialist Web Site* regarding her efforts to compile these statistics, acknowledged at the time that the available information was “just the tip of the iceberg.”

Releasing the data on Thursday in the form of a blog post, Amazon pretended that workers’ demands had nothing to do with the release of the information, absurdly posturing as an advocate of transparency and urging other companies to release similar data. “Wide availability of data would allow us to benchmark our progress and share best practices across businesses and industries,” the company stated.

Amazon has benefited spectacularly from its decision to keep workers at their posts during the pandemic. While competitors floundered and Amazon expanded its dominance over significant sections of the global logistics infrastructure, the company’s market capitalization rose from approximately \$920 billion at the start of the year to \$1.6 trillion as of Friday. This amounts to \$34 million for each worker who got sick.

Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, the world’s richest man, saw his wealth climb to over \$200 billion in September, an increase of approximately \$87 billion since the start of the year. This translates to approximately \$4.35 million for each worker who got sick.

Amazon accompanied the release of the total number of cases with tables purporting to show the rate of infection among Amazon workers being less than the state averages, congratulating itself on keeping workers safe. This is nonsense worthy of a Trump press conference, since it is obvious that working in a warehouse alongside hundreds of other workers represents an increased risk of infection over

staying at home. It is a dubious calculation in any case, under conditions where systematic testing is not being conducted.

In the case of Minnesota, Amazon's own statistics show the average rate of infection among Amazon workers was approximately 32 out of every thousand workers, far higher than the state average of 19.

While management has released the total number of infections, it is far from the total amount of data that workers need in order to make informed decisions about the danger of going to work and the adequacy of safety precautions in their workplaces.

In the context of a deadly pandemic, there is absolutely no legitimate reason why up-to-the-minute information should not be instantly accessible to all workers in any given workplace regarding suspected and positive cases, reported symptoms, pending tests, and preemptive quarantines. Indeed, workers need this information in order to take measures to ensure that their workspace is safe. The only reason to suppress this information is to blunt workers' opposition, to lull workers into a false sense of security, and to keep the profits flowing during the pandemic.

"Shameful that they are just now releasing this," Jana Jumps told the *International Amazon Workers Voice* on Friday. "I would love to know more specifics. How many cases at each facility? How many people were quarantined for close contact? Who is administering tests at the facilities?" She continued, "I feel like this story is just getting started."

"I'm not shocked by the numbers," an Amazon worker in Baltimore told the *International Amazon Workers Voice*, responding to the news, "because in a sense I always knew that the numbers were being buried, kind of like the president's been doing. Business as usual, everything's fine. So here we are."

"I have been saying and asking for many, many weeks about contact tracing. If someone in my work area is gone because they got COVID-19, I would expect that we would be contacted so that we could get tested," he continued, referring to his own warehouse. "Not once have I been contacted by anyone letting me know, even though I later found out that a coworker I was working closely with had contracted the virus. Is this contact tracing thing even working?"

Amazon has made no formal acknowledgment of the number of workers who have died from the virus, but NBC News has counted 10 worker deaths to date, according to a report published Wednesday.

Terrified of workers' opposition and reeling from the swarm of walkouts in April and May, Amazon management has brought on board veteran agents from the repressive

apparatus of the state to oversee its efforts to anticipate and suppress workers' resistance. The company has also been exposed engaging in systematic violations of workers' privacy, spying on them on social media as well as in internal listservs.

The attitude of management to workers' safety during the pandemic is only a continuation of Amazon's abominable safety record in the preceding years. In both 2018 and 2019, Amazon was included on "The Dirty Dozen" list maintained by the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health (National COSH), which described Amazon as a company that "put workers and communities at risk due to unsafe practices."

In 2019, there were 14,000 serious injuries at Amazon, according to a report published Tuesday by the Center for Investigative Reporting. This amounts to the incredible figure of eight serious injuries for every 100 workers every year, or double the already atrocious industry average.

This is consistent with data obtained by the *International Amazon Workers Voice*, which counted 567 serious injuries at one warehouse in Texas over a two-year period, including Amazon whistleblower Shannon Allen, who became homeless after her injury and began sleeping in the company parking lot.

Amazon workers' jobs have only become more unsafe during the pandemic, as the dangerousness of the work is now compounded by the risk of contracting the deadly virus.

The revelation that tens of thousands of workers at Amazon have already been sickened will only increase workers' exasperation with the murderous "back-to-work" and "re-opening" policies being implemented around the world.

*For help setting up a rank-and-file safety committee at your own site, contact the World Socialist Web Site's International Amazon Workers Voice.*



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