

“People bring items with them to scan in the bathroom so they can make rate”

Speedup, infections and near-death in freezers at Amazon Fresh warehouse

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Are you an Amazon worker interested in forming a rank-and-file safety committee at your workplace? The International Amazon Workers Voice is ready to help. Contact us today for more information.

Amazon Fresh, the grocery delivery arm of the e-commerce giant, is taking advantage of pandemic-induced unemployment to further transition to a casual labor model while taking only token measures to protect its workers from the deadly virus.

Amazon has profited immensely off of the coronavirus pandemic as social distancing measures drive higher sales volume for online retailers. Amazon is now worth \$1.58 trillion in total market capitalization, and CEO and founder Jeff Bezos, already the wealthiest person in human history before the pandemic, is now worth more than \$200 billion.

To fight the inhumane, dangerous, and highly exploitative conditions that Amazon workers confront they must organize themselves independently through rank-and-file safety committees, as teachers and autoworkers throughout the country have done. These committees, based on what Amazon workers urgently require and not what the company is willing to grant, would provide the means for workers to link up their struggles with those of workers in other industries and throughout the world, who are facing the same attacks.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with two Amazon Fresh workers at the SJC9 warehouse in the city of Brisbane, California, just south of San Francisco, about conditions at the facility, which employs several hundred full-time and part-time workers.

For Charles, who has worked part-time at the warehouse stocking items as a stower for about six months, the most dreaded shift is a freezer assignment. “After 40 minutes, you can’t feel your fingers. It’s pretty damn cold, it’s just like the freezer in your refrigerator.”

“The gloves they provide aren’t good enough. Your fingers get red. They provide handwarmers, but not enough for the fingers. I work faster in there because I want to get out of there as fast as possible. People do not want to be in there.”

Charles explained that Amazon does not offer extra pay to work in hazardous conditions, just the regular pay of \$17.25 per hour, “basically minimum wage in San Francisco,” one of the most expensive cities in the country.

“Shifts in the freezer are supposed to be two hours max,” explained Charles, “but there was an incident where an old lady was in there the whole day, six hours. She almost died in there.” She was never notified that she was free to leave after two hours.

Guidelines laid out in “The Practical Handbook of Warehousing,” produced by warehousing and logistics consultant Kenneth B. Ackerman, call for breaks of at least ten minutes *every hour* for any worker laboring in a freezer, a standard that is clearly ignored by Amazon Fresh.

Alex, a young part-time stower with two years at the warehouse, described the lack of basic COVID-19 hygiene for the shared warming apparel for freezer shifts. “The freezer suit is not enough to keep the workers warm. It gets below zero degrees Fahrenheit. Amazon provides an orange hat to cover the head and gloves, that’s about it. The suits don’t get sanitized after people wear them. It doesn’t get cleaned after people use it. They’re only going to be cleaned if they look dirty.”

Workers at the Brisbane warehouse have been notified of five COVID-19 cases. These notification texts, the first of which referred to a July 27 case, attempt to reassure workers by citing safety measures being taken at the plant which are inadequate, including “implementing social distancing, requiring all to wear a face covering, conducting temperature checks, and doing more frequent cleanings.”

Amazon Fresh began a pilot COVID-19 testing program on September 23, more than six months into the pandemic. In spite of five prior confirmed cases going back to July, it had no systematic testing of the hundreds of full-time and part-time Brisbane employees before then. Amazon had simply notified workers through mass texts of cases.

The testing program is conducted on an opt-in basis and

although more than a month has passed, many employees still have not been tested. Amazon internal documents refer to clinicians who should be present to oversee the self-applied nasal testing process, but Charles reports that no clinicians were present for their test, meaning that he and many other workers had to rely solely on written and video instructional materials to ensure they collected their test samples correctly.

“They’ve taken advantage of this pandemic to an extreme level. It’s really sickening,” Charles continued. “When COVID-19 first started, they gave a \$2 an hour bump but they stopped that back in June. They gave a \$500 bonus, \$295 after tax, but they’ve stopped that.”

“Now there’s not enough work. They over-hired people, mostly part-timers. They’ve started to limit shifts to four hours only. You have to fight for shifts. You have to sign up online and all the shifts are usually gone within a few minutes.”

“Breaks are supposed to be 20 minutes, but the place is so big that it takes 5 minutes to walk to the break room, at least... Lunch is only 30 minutes unpaid. They don’t provide food at all. There is no food within walking distance. You have to bring your own lunch. There are only 2 or 3 microwaves.”

At a time when millions of laid-off workers are food insecure and have been forced to seek out help from food banks, Amazon Fresh is destroying huge amounts of surplus food, according to Charles. “There’s a huge amount of food waste in the destroy area. If it has sugar in it, it’s destroyed. If not, it’s given to a donation center.”

Given the mass layoffs and difficulty finding work, many elderly and disabled workers have been hired at the Amazon Fresh facility. “One worker is 73, and the only reason she’s working at Amazon is that nobody else in the country will hire her,” Charles said. “One of the [mentally disabled] workers complained to them that they wanted him to do a faster rate, but he couldn’t because he’s mentally disabled. You can’t expect them to have the same rate as me.”

Another man with disabilities was fired after missing two shifts. “They never emailed or told him that he was fired. He went to work the other day only to be told that he had been fired. He has to take the bus. It’s really hard for him to get to work because he doesn’t drive.”

Charles spoke of Amazon’s notorious pressure to maintain high rates of throughput. Managers “walk around with laptops” checking to see if workers have any “time off task” (ToT) on their tracking devices, which indicates that someone hasn’t scanned anything for over 5 minutes. “If you have ToT, they can get you in trouble for it. You can’t look in the system, but the managers can... The new scanners are really evil. If you don’t do anything, the system can lock you out and you have to see a manager. Maybe 10 minutes.”

This detailed monitoring is “nerve racking,” Charles said. “Sometimes there’s not enough product to stow. Sometimes I stow really slow, one item every two minutes, prolong my time, to make sure I don’t get ToT.”

“There have been instances of people bringing items to the bathroom to keep scanning. That’s the only way they can track you is by the scanner [used to track the movement of products]. They also make you ask to go to the bathroom, it’s like preschool.”

Charles described the hostile work environment fostered by Amazon through managers. “All of the managers are extremely disrespectful, rude, arrogant, people who don’t talk to you like you’re human. A lot of people avoid working on certain days with certain managers. They’ve made employees cry a lot of times.” Both Charles and Alex confirmed that Amazon uses snitches to report on violations of the company’s dictatorial work requirements.

Charles and Alex support the call by the *World Socialist Web Site International Amazon Workers Voice* to form rank-and-file safety committees to oppose inadequate safety measures and brutal work speedup. They discussed what demands such a committee, once established, should fight for. “Definitely higher pay,” Charles said, adding that he’d like to see the end of ToT tracking, safety hazards, and the brutality of Amazon management.

Alex stated, “We should have an incentive for the workers to go into the freezer. It should be a specialty job for more experienced people going there. There should be more COVID testing. The freezer suits should be sanitized when people regularly use it.”

Alex also connected the policies of Amazon with the homicidal policy of “herd immunity” pursued by the Trump administration. “Trump is kind of cuckoo crazy right now. He didn’t wear a mask and he has coronavirus.” However, he added that a Biden presidency would not make life better for workers. “It seems that with Democrats, the people making decisions are [still] the elite.”

We encourage all Amazon workers—whether at its fulfilment centers, Amazon Fresh hubs, Whole Foods— to contact the IAWV today to get assistance in exposing conditions at your workplace and building rank-and-file safety committees to coordinate opposition.



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