

Coronavirus outbreak at Amazon warehouse in Troutdale, Oregon exceeds 100 infections

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8 December 2020

As of the end of November, more than 100 infections have been reported in a major coronavirus outbreak at an Amazon warehouse in Troutdale, Oregon. The outbreak at the PDX9 Fulfillment Center, an 855,000-square-foot building, is still considered “active.”

Oregon’s health authorities reported last week that since the start of the pandemic, there have been 61 deaths and 11,139 cases associated with workplace outbreaks in Oregon.

The outbreak at Amazon’s Troutdale warehouse is the fourth largest in the state. The largest three are at prison complexes: the Snake River Correctional Institution in Ontario (550 cases); the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution in Pendleton (520 cases); and the Oregon State Correctional Institution in Salem (192 cases).

The PDX9 warehouse was, even before the coronavirus pandemic, among the most dangerous of all Amazon’s notoriously unsafe workplaces. According to Amazon’s own records, which were analyzed at the end of last year by the *Portland Mercury* newspaper, “26 out of every 100 workers at PDX9 sustained an injury in 2018.”

This is the same warehouse where management is forcing workers to sign a broad “non-disclosure agreement,” which was the subject of a report last week in the *Willamette Week* newspaper.

While Amazon’s practice of forcing workers to sign such agreements dates back many years and is not limited to the PDX9 warehouse, these agreements take on a new dimension in the context of the coronavirus pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, Amazon management has sought to conceal the extent of infections in order to lull workers into a false sense of security. When workers demanded specific information regarding their workplaces, management insisted that the data was protected by privacy laws and refused to make it available. Spontaneous walkouts and sickouts over the spring and summer were frequently triggered by workers’

independent discovery of a case that had been covered up by management.

In the face of the management coverup, workers took to social media to gather and compile their own statistics. Former Amazon worker Jana Jumpp, who prepared the most comprehensive count, told the *World Socialist Web Site* in June that her count of 2,000 infections represented “just the tip of the iceberg.”

At the end of September, Amazon quietly posted data indicating that nearly 20,000 US employees, including warehouse and Whole Foods workers, had tested positive.

The Troutdale “non-disclosure agreement,” which was described in the *Willamette Week* report, subjects workers to civil liability if they disclose “proprietary or confidential information of Amazon in whatever form, tangible or intangible, whether or not marked or otherwise designated as confidential, that is not otherwise generally known to the public, relating or pertaining to Amazon’s business, projects, products, customers, suppliers, inventions, or trade secrets.”

Since information about the health and safety conditions relating to the coronavirus inside Amazon warehouses is “information. .. pertaining to Amazon’s business” that is “not otherwise generally known to the public,” this suggests that workers could face a lawsuit for talking on social media about the number of infections in their workplace.

These types of agreements can have a powerful chilling effect, regardless of whether Amazon’s expansively vague and tendentious terms would hold up in court. Workers do not have the ability to pay tens of thousands of dollars in legal fees to defend themselves against armies of lawyers working for a multinational conglomerate with limitless resources. Managers can threaten to sue workers who raise concerns, and rather than risk a lawsuit, workers may simply choose to remain silent.

Amazon is bloated with huge profits resulting from the pandemic, as demand soared for the delivery of goods during lockdowns around the world. While millions of businesses closed their doors and tens of millions of workers added their names to the unemployment rolls, Amazon expanded its operations by hiring hundreds of thousands of workers.

Buoyed by a 74 percent rise in share prices this year and the bipartisan Wall Street bailout engineered by the Democratic and Republican parties in the US, Amazon's market capitalization has risen to \$1.58 trillion as of yesterday. The soaring price of Amazon stock has resulted in the world's richest person, Jeff Bezos, adding around \$80 billion to his personal fortune, which is now estimated at approximately \$200 billion.

Amazon now faces mounting anger within its own workforce, as workers around the world demand to know why they were kept at their stations and worked to the bone without adequate safeguards, while Bezos, from the safety of his mansions, added mountains of cash to his fortune on a scale exceeding the national budgets of large national governments.

Management's campaign of surveillance and repression is motivated above all by fear of a looming insurrection of Amazon workers around the world. The use of "non-disclosure agreements" is only one facet of this oppressive framework.

Amazon has formed its own industrial police and intelligence agency, dubbed Global Security Operations Center (GSOC), which is tasked with targeting industrial actions by Amazon workers around the world that might pose a threat to company profits. This agency is being staffed with veterans of the repressive apparatus of the American state: the police, the intelligence agencies, and the military.

The efforts to anticipate and block an insurrection by Amazon workers includes extensive spying on Amazon workers and invasions of their privacy, including the monitoring of private Facebook groups and listservs by management spies.

Amazon was exposed last month for sending spies from the notorious Pinkerton detective agency into a warehouse in Poland. And recent reports from the Spanish media outlet *El Diario* point to the use of Pinkerton agents last year in Spain, in the context of a broader transport strike in Catalonia.

According to the report in *El Diario*, which Amazon management has denied, the spies were used on October 30, 2019 at a warehouse in El Prat de Llobregat, in the

province of Barcelona.

Anonymous reviews left by workers on the employment web site *Indeed* paint a devastating picture of working conditions at Amazon in Troutdale.

Workers summarized their experiences as "Repetitive, boring, strict," "Horrible work experience," "Physically demanding and no support," "Exhausting," "Boring and treated as a machine," and "Tedious, repetitive work."

The only "upside," many workers wrote, is that they made enough money to pay rent. "Fast-paced, fast burnout," wrote one worker. "Definitely a place where people are encouraged to work hard, work extra hours, and keep up the pace."

"They work you to near death," wrote an IT support technician at the same warehouse. "They make sure you are left with no life in your body at the end of shift ... if you do good, they raise your requirements."

"It's all about productivity there. You as a person don't matter," another worker wrote. "The upper leadership only pays lip service about caring about health and safety of employees."

"Personally, I hate it," wrote one current worker. "I've worked there two years and I want to kill myself every time I walk in the building." Another worker wrote, "They don't care about the employee, just the money!!"

These conditions underscore the need for Amazon workers to build rank-and-file safety committees to expose the unsafe conditions, mobilize collective action by Amazon workers and broader sections of the working class to defend militant workers against victimization and fight for workers' control over production and health and safety conditions inside the warehouses. For more information, Amazon workers should contact the *International Amazon Workers Voice* and join our Facebook page.



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