Coronavirus outbreak forces closure of Amazon warehouse in New Jersey

Erik Schreiber
22 December 2020

On December 19, Amazon closed its warehouse in Robbinsville, New Jersey, (PNE5) after testing revealed an increase in asymptomatic coronavirus cases. The company notified workers that the site would remain closed until December 26 and that they would be paid for shifts they missed because of the closure.

"This is exactly why we built the [in-house coronavirus testing] program—to identify asymptomatic cases and ensure that we can take swift action to prevent spread," said Amazon spokesperson Lisa Levandowski in a statement. But she did not answer a reporter's question about whether the facility would be cleaned while it is closed, nor did she say how many cases had been detected at the Robbinsville warehouse.

Levandowski's depiction of Amazon's diligence does not jibe with workers' experience. The text messages that the company sends to alert employees about infections often are delayed. They do not identify the infected workers, state where they were stationed or explain who has been in contact with them. Text messages have even been sent to the wrong warehouse, according to workers.

The outbreak in Robbinsville is not the first to occur at an Amazon facility in New Jersey. In April, 48 workers at a fulfillment center in Edison became infected with the virus. At the time, it was the largest reported outbreak at any of Amazon's locations in the state.

New Jersey is an important center of operations for Amazon. The company employs more than 34,000 workers at 14 fulfillment centers and three delivery stations in the state. New Jersey also is home to 21 Whole Foods stores, which are owned by Amazon.

Like the rest of the country, New Jersey has undergone a sharp increase in the number of daily infections and deaths during the past month. On December 21, the state reported 3,186 new cases and 29 confirmed deaths. As of that date, the state's seven-day average for new positive tests had increased by 12 percent over the average one month earlier. The daily average of new cases had been greater than 4,000 since November 23. The most recent statewide test positivity rate was 10.78 percent. Governor Phil Murphy recently extended New Jersey's public health emergency for the 10th time.

Levandowski's statement that Amazon favors swift action to combat the pandemic is a bald-faced lie. The first case of coronavirus was reported in Washington, the state where Amazon's headquarters is located, on January 21. However, the company provided no gloves, masks or other personal protective equipment (PPE) to employees for weeks. On March 21, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, the world's richest man, told his employees that they would have to wait their turn for PPE, despite their ongoing risk of exposure to the virus.

It was not swift action but inaction that allowed nearly 20,000 Amazon employees to be infected with the coronavirus as of September 19. This number, which is the company's own tally, is undoubtedly an underestimate. Amazon's ability to provide this count also belied its previous assertions that it did not track infections because it did not consider this information "particularly useful."

The large number of cases reported by Amazon demonstrated the utter inadequacy of the purely cosmetic measures that the company had put into place. One such measure was temperature checks. But, a fever does not develop until several days after a person has been infected, meaning that he or she is contagious before any symptoms arise. Another measure was the installation of makeshift hand sanitizer dispensers, but workers regularly found them empty or broken.

© World Socialist Web Site

Despite this high number of infections Amazon has closed few warehouses during the pandemic. In March, the company closed facilities in Queens, New York, and Shepherdsville, Kentucky, after workers at those locations had tested positive for the virus. Despite the lack of adequate measures to prevent the spread of the virus, Amazon has kept most of its warehouses open throughout the pandemic because they are considered essential facilities.

Amazon enjoyed a 36 percent increase in sales during the third quarter, as people bought goods online to avoid shopping in stores. This year, Bezos's personal wealth has increased to $200 billion, a result of Amazon's relentless exploitation of its workforce. Despite this, Bezos has not seen fit to reinstate even the derisory $2 per hour raise that the company enacted in March and rescinded in May. Workers cannot even take unpaid time off; the company ended that policy in May as well. Any employee who refuses to work in unsafe conditions is fired and replaced.

Workers are not taking this abuse lying down, however. Amazon employees walked off the job in Memphis, Tennessee, after a serious coronavirus outbreak had occurred. In San Leandro, California, workers protested Amazon's insufficient cleaning and sanitation during the pandemic. Nor have workplace actions been limited to the United States. More than 1,500 workers in Germany struck on Prime Day (a worldwide sales event) in October, and workers recently protested near an Amazon warehouse in Barcelona, Spain.

Most significantly, Amazon workers at the **BWI2 fulfillment center** in Baltimore, Maryland, formed an independent rank-and-file safety committee on December 13 to protect the lives of workers. The committee aims to expose the unhealthy conditions that the company maintains at the facility, as well as the official lies that are intended to cover up these conditions. The committee is demanding a genuine system for regular coronavirus testing and contact tracing, paid time off during the pandemic, the closure and cleaning of all facilities, an end to speed-up and the reinstatement of hazard pay.

The formation of this committee is a major step forward for workers at Amazon and throughout the logistics industry. The unions, such as the Teamsters and the United Auto Workers, have long since ceased to fight on behalf of workers. These organizations now function as an arm of management that works to enforce unsafe conditions. Their bureaucracies include officials who make six-figure salaries and often sit on the boards of the very companies they are supposedly fighting.

Workers must establish their complete independence from these corrupt organizations, and the pro-corporate Democratic and Republican parties, as the essential precondition for defending jobs, wages, benefits and working conditions. The World Socialist Web Site and the *International Amazon Workers Voice* will assist workers who are interested in forming rank-and-file safety committees at their workplaces. We encourage workers to **contact** the International Amazon Workers Voice for information on how to join and build a committee at your worksite.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site