Three-quarters of infected Memphis workers remained on the job after testing positive for coronavirus

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A study by health officials in Shelby County, Tennessee found that more than three-quarters of infected people during the month of November continued to work at least one day after testing positive. The seat of Shelby County is Memphis, the 28th largest city in the country.

The study was based off interviews with 303 people, all of whom had tested positive for coronavirus. "We want to look at specifically how many days people worked while they potentially were infectious to others," the Health Department Director for Shelby County, Tennessee, Dr. Alisa Haushalter, said. From this group, 76 percent stated that they continued to go back to work after being diagnosed positive with COVID-19. Of this group, 45 percent worked about one day before quarantining, 29 percent worked for two days and 10 percent worked for three days.

In reporting the study, the Memphis Fox affiliate cited local medical expert Dr. Jon McCullers, who told the station that "[the] data shows that warehouses and factories are the most likely places where employees continue to clock into work even after a day or two from when they contracted the virus."

According to its official COVID-19 dashboard, Shelby County has had 67,198 positive cases and 891 deaths. The positivity rate in the county is 9.55 percent, indicating that the county's testing capacity is being stretched beyond its limits. According to a separate report, almost 2,200 COVID-19 contacts have been quarantined due to exposure since December 15. As of August, there were only 1,700 contact tracers for the entire state of Tennessee, according to the state Commissioner of Health.

While last month's study does not attempt to explain why so many people continued to work, the fact is that major corporations have continued to operate at close to full capacity during the height of the pandemic, resorting to lies and threats to keep workers on the job under unsafe conditions.

Memphis is a critical logistics hub for companies such as FedEx, UPS, Amazon, Nike, International Paper and Autozone. FedEx, which employs more than 30,000 workers in the area, is headquartered in Memphis, as is Autozone. The UPS Memphis hub in Shelby County received a corporate investment of $216 million in February 2020 for expansion to its facilities at the Memphis International Airport.

The state gave out millions of dollars in grants to major companies in 2019, through the FastTrack grant program. FedEx received a $10 million grant to expand its logistics facilities in Shelby County, and AutoZone Inc. received a $2.3 million grant to expand and open new locations in the area.

The logistics companies have seen their package volumes grow substantially during the pandemic due to a rise in online sales, and have embarked on hiring sprees to keep pace with demand. Stock values for FedEx and UPS have gone up 96 and 43 percent during the pandemic, and UPS reported $59.7 billion in revenue during the first three quarters of 2020, according to Forbes. Meanwhile, the city of Memphis also had a poverty rate of 25.1 percent even before the pandemic, two and a half times the national average.

Asked by Fox13 for comment, the news publication was told by various businesses that they "don't share case counts."

With the end of supplemental unemployment and the reopening of most of the economy during the summer,

workers are often forced to risk life and limb in order to make ends meet. On December 23, ProPublica reported a 23-year-old FedEx temp worker died from falling chest first into a metal pole after a door of a container full of packages had hit him on the back of his leg.

Business Journal profiled Memphis Amazon workers in November who told the outlet: "We don't want to get sick or threaten our children and our families, and we feel like they are playing around with our lives."

UPS pilots, who are flying in and out of Memphis to transport the vaccine throughout the country, have had an increase in COVID-19 cases. Over 200 UPS pilots tested positive last year, including 100 in November alone. According to the AVWeb Reports website, the rate of infection among UPS pilots is around 5.5 percent, compared to 3.9 percent for the US as a whole.

The Air Line Pilots Association reports 185 FedEx pilots have also tested positive. According to a union statement: "Conditions are significantly worsening during our busiest season and many pilots are at or near their physical and psychological limits.''