

Hundreds of workplace outbreaks of COVID-19 along US West Coast

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11 January 2021

Cases of COVID-19 are surging across the United States, resulting in thousands of deaths and hospitalizations every day. On Friday, new single-day records of over 300,000 new cases and 4,100 deaths were reported in the United States. The situation is particularly dire in the state of California, where medical workers are now being forced to ration care due to understaffing and insufficient capacity.

The mainstream media and politicians are making their best efforts to argue that the rampant spread of the virus falls on the shoulders of individuals, who they claim have been “irresponsible” and not following physical distancing and mask mandates.

However, this narrative ignores the spread of the virus throughout large workplaces and businesses, where workers have been forced back into unsafe conditions to ensure the continuation of capitalist profit making. Data collected from three West Coast states—California, Oregon and Washington—provide a snapshot of this reality.

In Los Angeles County, the Department of Public Health lists 511 active outbreaks at workplaces, directly connected to the infections of 10,000 employees. This data, according to *Los Angeles* magazine, “accounts only for commercial settings that are not schools, homeless shelters, health care facilities, jails, or related categories—though certainly those institutions are also themselves workplaces.” Further, it only shows cases that are linked through contact tracing within a 14-day period and which are reported by businesses.

The workers infected labor in some of the lowest-paid and least safe conditions within the service, logistics and food processing industries:

- Seven Costco warehouses have at least 15 infected workers, with one in Culver City reporting 71 active cases.
- Over 215 workers are infected across multiple Target store locations.

- Four Amazon warehouses reported nearly 200 cases.
- A single 99 Cents Only Stores location reports 113 confirmed cases.
- A logistics warehouse for retail brand Fashion Nova reports 203 cases.
- One hundred and fifty-one cases were detected at a FedEx Ground center in Pacoima, with 505 total cases across nine FedEx facilities.

There also have been infections recently among workers at McDonald’s, Chick-Fil-A, In-N-Out Burger, Best Buy, Nordstrom, Trader Joe’s, Whole Foods, Apple stores, CVS and a long list of other businesses. Even cast and crew members in the media production industry have confronted the spread of the virus with hotspots at Warner Brothers, NBC, Netflix and CBS.

Similar reports were released by the health departments in the states of Oregon and Washington, which are located north of California. The most recent weekly report by Oregon Health Authority (OHA) reveals 128 active outbreaks. Some of the workplaces with the highest number of infections include:

- Amazon fulfillment centers, with 180 total cases in a Troutdale facility and 112 reported in Salem
- Amy’s Kitchen, an organic food supplier, with 112 cases
- Walmart Distribution Center in Hermiston, with 104 cases
- Fred Meyer Distribution Center in Clackamas, with 96 cases
- Masami Foods, Inc near Klamath Falls with 39 cases

At least 15 cases per facility were reported at dozens of other retail, service, agriculture and logistics job sites. To date, 70 deaths and 14,549 confirmed cases are reported and directly linked to workplace spread.

In Washington state, the most recent weekly update from December 28 reported 180 active cases linked to workplace outbreaks in the week prior, with 2,289 cases

total since the start of the pandemic. Washington State Department of Health only tallies active cases by industry, with food service, homeless shelters, construction, childcare and K-12 schools, agriculture and manufacturing having the highest numbers of reported cases.

While not listed in that specific summary, 174 employees of a Costco warehouse store in Union Gap, a suburb in Yakima County, have so far tested positive in an outbreak that was first reported on December 24. At the time, *Yakima Herald* reported 68 store employees testing positive in the week prior. In a span of a week and a half, the virus had spread from 18 percent of the employees to almost half.

The Costco warehouse remains open, threatening to infect more workers and shoppers. The city commissioners are intent on not only allowing Costco to remain open, but also criticizing Democratic Governor Jay Inslee from the right and demanding even more schools, churches and businesses reopen.

Yakima is a county with a high percentage of essential workers, more than 60 percent of the population, and an infection rate that is 25 times above the state average. Many immigrant workers have jobs in service and agriculture, and have been forced to work in unsafe conditions since March. In response to these deadly conditions, fruit-packing and agricultural workers in Yakima County went on strike against six different companies last May.

It should be noted that in each of these states, the highest number of reported infections are concentrated in long-term nursing facilities and correctional centers. Nursing facilities contain the most vulnerable population—the elderly or those unable to care for themselves—and, as with the broader health care system, are chronically understaffed and short on supplies.

In prisons, many of them privately owned and operated, thousands of poor and working class incarcerated people are denied basic health precautions like social distancing, ventilation and protective gear, while living in appalling conditions.

To provide a brief picture of how bad the situation is facing the population behind bars, the top five “workplaces” with the most active cases in Oregon are all prisons, with those five alone reporting 1,819 confirmed cases. California’s 35 prisons have reported more than 40,000 total cases among inmates and staff, with a staggering 25 percent of all inmates infected at Central California Women’s Facility in San Joaquin Valley.

While the reported number of cases at job sites across the West Coast reveals an increasingly desperate situation facing workers, the official tallies remain an underestimation of the true scale of workplace-based infection without mass testing and contact tracing. When positivity rates surpass 5 percent, arcane contact tracing systems become overwhelmed and contact tracing officials are unable to quickly follow up with every positive case and locate the source of spread. Further, all data depend on self-reporting by businesses, and many workers know that infections have been deliberately concealed by management to ensure there is no disruption of operations.

However, the information that is available serves to undermine the false narrative perpetuated by the Democratic Party, which dominates West Coast politics, that infection is caused solely by individual behavior and that it is “safe” to reopen non-essential businesses and schools despite the rise of cases. Until vaccines for the coronavirus have been widely distributed, urgent measures must be taken to reduce the spread to the lowest level possible and save hundreds of thousands lives.

The Socialist Equality Party advances a program of working class action. Workers must demand the closure of all schools and non-essential workplaces, with full compensation for all affected workers and small businesses. Essential workers must be provided with the most advanced protective measures possible and must oversee the health and safety measures in their workplaces until they can get the vaccine. These efforts must be combined with the implementation of mass testing and contact tracing and a massive infusion of funds into the healthcare system to ensure free, high-quality care, to be paid for by the reallocation of the trillions handed out to the major banks and corporations over the last year.

Human society has at its hands the science, public health knowledge and technology to carry out these policies, but the principal obstacle is the financial oligarchy and capitalism, which subordinate social need and human life itself to its endless pursuit of profit.



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