

Dozens of COVID-19 infections shut down Detroit Whole Foods

Our reporters
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On Tuesday, February 23, a Whole Foods location in the Midtown neighborhood of Detroit temporarily shut down and asked customers to leave. Shortly after, Detroit's chief public health officer Denise Fair confirmed a massive outbreak at the store in a press release, urging residents who had visited the location between February 12 and 22 to quarantine and monitor symptoms. Twenty-three of 196 employees tested positive for COVID-19.

One worker told the local *Metro Times* that employees receive updates about co-workers' positive tests via automated text message and that the previous weekend, "[We] were getting so many text messages ... that we thought it was spam, that they didn't know what it was." Before the Tuesday evening shutdown, management asked employees to get rapid COVID tests during store hours at a nearby testing location, and so many employees were sent home that the store was "like a ghost town" the next day.

In a statement, Whole Foods, which is owned by online retail giant Amazon, said: "The safety of our Team Members and customers remains our top priority, which is why we address any confirmed diagnosis in our stores with a comprehensive action plan that includes enhanced cleaning and contact tracing, as well as communicating directly with our Team Members. We support any Team Member who is diagnosed positive or placed in quarantine so they can prioritize their health and stay home. We have rolled out extensive measures to keep people safe in our stores and are diligently following all guidance from local health and food safety authorities."

In reality, employees are not compensated for taking time off to quarantine after being exposed to the virus or for testing positive. One employee told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "More than 10 people were not

symptomatic. ... Because of the contact rules there are people out of work that did not test positive but were in proximity that already have taken time off because of previous exposure and have been out of work for more than an accumulated month of the last six [months]. Some of them are single mothers."

Another employee told the WWS, "COVID is everywhere. I think they were letting too many customers in for a long time, and that's where it probably came from. It was overwhelming at times the amount of people that were in the store, customers and team members."

A former Whole Foods worker said that "there is absolutely no way employees can distance themselves from one another in the back work areas, break room and offices," similar to conditions which exist in other workplaces, including the auto plants, which have become vectors for COVID transmission across metro Detroit.

"It's very hard to stay six feet away from anyone at any time, much less for the whole eight hours that we're there," a worker told the *Metro Times*.

Whole Foods pays a \$15-per-hour wage to its employees, nowhere near enough to cover the basic cost of living for an individual, much less those caring for family members. Since workers are paid hourly, hours lost due to quarantine results in smaller paychecks, creating a situation where workers must choose between making money to stay afloat or potentially infecting themselves and their coworkers during an outbreak.

Whole Foods and Amazon—owned by billionaire Jeff Bezos, whose wealth has increased by \$70 billion during the pandemic—have had at least 20,000 reported and confirmed COVID cases at their facilities.

The city of Detroit was one of the early epicenters of

the pandemic. Wayne County has reported a total of 103,000 COVID-19 cases with 4,149 deaths as of this writing. After a six-week decline in positive cases, the drop in cases has ceased in the state of Michigan, and it is currently one of the leading states for the new variants of the COVID-19 virus with over 400 confirmed cases. While many of those cases have been spread in correctional facilities, there is also “undetected spread” in the community, according to Dr. Joneigh Khaldun, chief medical director for the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

The outbreaks in Detroit and elsewhere will continue to get worse, as a direct result of the partial reopening of businesses to 50 percent capacity this week and the reopening of schools for in-person learning over the coming weeks.

United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) International Union President Marc Perrone told the press that the Whole Foods outbreak was “another wake-up call to grocery companies and elected leaders that these brave essential workers deserve and have earned more protections and must be immediately prioritized for vaccine access. The Whole Foods outbreak further proves what UFCW has warned the public about for months—that national grocery companies must stop making excuses and must immediately increase worker protection, enforce mask wearing in stores, provide hazard pay, and commit to disclosing when frontline workers have been infected and died.”

In reality, the UFCW has played a leading role in helping companies across the food supply chain in enforcing unsafe working conditions. In the meatpacking industry alone, it has jointly overseen an almost uninterrupted maintenance of production which has led to over 57,000 infections and 284 deaths, according to the Food and Environment Reporting Network.

One of the most grotesque examples of this is in Waterloo, Iowa, where it negotiated perfect attendance bonuses at a Tyson pork plant even as management was taking bets about how many workers would eventually become infected. After this became a national scandal last fall, the union local hid behind its lawyers and dodged dozens of media inquiries by the local press, prompting denunciations even from the local sheriff of the union’s pro-corporate policies.

The UFCW is also the parent union of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), which is running a union recognition vote at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama. President Biden, who is spearheading the unsafe return to schools and has not repealed Trump’s use of the Defense Production Act to force meatpacking plants to remain open, all but endorsed a “yes” vote at the warehouse in an extraordinary statement published last weekend on Twitter. This demonstrates that the Democratic Party sees the unions not as potential adversaries, but as reliable enforcers of the dictates of the capitalist ruling class.

Regardless of how the vote in Alabama turns out, workers at Amazon and Whole Foods confront the task of organizing themselves independently of both management and the pro-capitalist trade unions. This means above all expanding the network of independent rank-and-file safety committees which has been founded in workplaces throughout the country over the last year. To get in touch with other committees, speak to the WSWs and get more information, visit wsws.org/workers.



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