

Canadian health officials shut Amazon warehouse after mass COVID-19 outbreak

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Public health authorities ordered an Amazon fulfilment centre in Brampton, Ontario, to shut down for 14 days Friday, following a massive COVID-19 outbreak that has infected 240 workers in recent weeks. At least 10 cases at the facility, located in the Greater Toronto Area that has 6.2 million residents, have been linked to the new variants of the virus that are more contagious and lethal.

Demonstrating its utter contempt for the lives and safety of its employees, the company released a statement shortly after its doors were shuttered announcing it would appeal the shutdown order. Amazon spokesman Dave Bauer rejected the notion that “the data supports this closure,” citing recent test positivity rates of “less than one percent.”

This criminal indifference to the lives of Amazon workers is par for the course for a company that has made record profits since the pandemic began. Exploiting the growth of online shopping and the influx of newly unemployed workers to staff his sweatshops, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos added \$70 billion in 2020 to his already astronomical net worth as one of the world’s richest individuals.

With a record of 617 infections since last October, a staggering 30 workers per week on average have contracted COVID-19 at Amazon’s Brampton Heritage Road warehouse. This is a 12 percent total infection rate of the facility’s 5,000 full-time and temporary employees. While Amazon has vowed to pay its full-time workers during the shutdown, it avoided making any commitment to support temporary employees. Temporary workers are not eligible for sick pay.

Amazon brags that the fulfilment centre is 856,000 square feet, larger than 10 football fields, and is one of the most automated warehouses in Canada, complete with a fleet of robots to retrieve the more than 10 million items it stocks there.

A Peel Public Health investigation determined that there was a high risk of exposure to COVID-19 for everyone working at the Amazon Heritage facility. The rate of infection across Peel Region—which includes Brampton, Caledon and Mississauga—has been dropping, while the rate

in the Amazon plant was increasing significantly. “Through a number of rounds of mass testing we have detected more and more cases and it really points to a significant increase. Almost 40 percent of the cases within that outbreak came just within the last few weeks. Further to that, there is an increasing challenge that the cases are not all linked to the same cluster, so there seems to be disseminated spread within the facility. And also, just in the last week or so, we have started detecting variants of concern,” remarked Peel Region Medical Officer of Health Dr. Lawrence Loh.

For months, workers have been raising concerns about the brutal conditions of workplace speedup and management’s cavalier attitude towards even the most basic COVID-19 safety precautions.

“This is something we all knew would happen,” Gagandeep Kaur, an organizer at the Warehouse Workers Centre, told the *Toronto Star*. “From the beginning we had heard from the workers about lack of social distancing and company policies about penalizing them about production—which actually discourage them to follow any of the safety protocols.”

Conditions at the Brampton facility are replicated at Amazon’s other Canadian warehouses, as well as at workplaces across the country and internationally. In January, a Canada Post facility in nearby Mississauga saw an outbreak that resulted in more than 300 infections and the death of one worker, while three workers at an Olymel meatpacking plant in Alberta have lost their lives since January. There are 308 workplace outbreaks listed on the Peel Public Health web site.

The Amazon closure order came four days after Brampton Transit suspended all bus service to the Steeles Avenue West Corridor on March 8 for at least a week to allow Peel Region Public Health to investigate 12 confirmed COVID-19 cases in the past month among bus drivers working along the Steeles Avenue route. Seven hundred Brampton Transit workers have been tested for the virus in the past week and anyone who refused testing has been ordered to self-isolate. Brampton Mayor Patrick Brown reported last Tuesday that

one bus driver is currently in hospital in a coma due to COVID-19.

Two Amazon fulfilment centres located in southwest Brampton were affected by the cancelling of these three busy bus routes, which stop around the Heritage Road facility. Amazon promptly hired its own private charter bus transportation service for its workers after Brampton Transit's shut down so it could continue its deadly drive for profits at the expense of the lives of its workforce.

The Region of Peel—which has 1.5 million residents—is one of the epicentres of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada.

Peel contains a disproportionate number of new immigrants, many from South Asia, who are herded into giant warehouses or factories under cramped conditions and paid poverty wages for backbreaking work. Its housing market, the most unaffordable in the country, forces multiple families or generations of the same family to crowd together under one roof, further facilitating the spread of disease.

The Progressive Conservative provincial government led by Donald Trump admirer Doug Ford regularly scapegoats these workers for the pandemic, chiding them for failing to follow social distancing guidelines.

Confident in the government's support, employers like Amazon routinely flout even the utterly inadequate safety measures ordered by health and labor ministry officials. When the labor ministry mounted a "blitz" of Peel-region warehouses and distribution centres last month, it found 43 percent of the 208 facilities inspected were failing to adhere to government health and safety guidelines.

Provincial governments across the country, from Ontario's Tories to British Columbia's New Democrats, have rushed to dismantle the already inadequate public health measures following a modest dip in infections from the peak of the second wave during December and January. This has been spearheaded by the reckless reopening of schools, which is motivated by the ruling elite's desire to free parents from child care responsibilities so they can return to dangerous workplaces. These policies have been overseen and supported by Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government.

Medical experts are warning that these policies are leading Canada into an even more deadly third wave. Yesterday, Ontario logged 1,747 new positive cases, up from 1,299 the previous Sunday and 1,062 the week before that. The seven-day moving average of new cases is distinctly on the upswing.

Ontario public health authorities, acting under pressure from the Tory government, have obstinately refused to publish the locations of workplace outbreaks, hypocritically citing privacy concerns. The corporate press has begrudgingly admitted that workplaces are the leading vector for the spread of the virus. However, Amazon's

vehement resistance to the shutdown order was so egregious that Peel Public Health was compelled to disclose just how rampant the outbreak had become.

The massive COVID-19 outbreak at Amazon's Brampton Heritage Road warehouse underscores the urgent necessity of Amazon workers organizing themselves independently—through the formation of rank-and-file committees—to protect their health and very lives. They should demand that the vast wealth hoarded by Bezos and the profits made through their brutal exploitation be used to fund a comprehensive workplace safety program, including daily testing and contact tracing, and an end to the company's brutal speed-up work regime. Workers should also demand the reinstatement of hazard pay, which was disgracefully abandoned by Amazon in May even as the pandemic continued to rage.

To fight for these demands, Amazon workers in Brampton should establish a rank-and-file safety committee in opposition to the pro-corporate trade unions, which have facilitated the ruling elite's reopening of the economy and have no interest in protecting workers' lives. They should follow the example set by their Amazon colleagues in Baltimore, Maryland, in the US who wrote in the founding statement of their rank-and-file safety committee that the money to ensure the health and safety of Amazon workers "exists in the bank accounts and stock portfolios of Jeff Bezos and the rest of Amazon's executives and corporate board. All wealth and profit obtained at the expense of workers during the pandemic, beginning with Bezos's billions, must be seized and used for these purposes."

To take up this fight, Amazon workers should join the growing network of national and international rank-and-file safety committees and subscribe to and circulate the *International Amazon Workers Voice* newsletter.



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