

Amazon brings back in-person staff meetings as COVID-19 pandemic surges

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Last month, Amazon, the global shipping behemoth with a near \$1.6 trillion market capitalization, announced to its workforce in a graphic-laden email that it has brought back weekly in-person “stand-up” meetings for its warehouse staff even as COVID-19 still remains a threat for all working people.

The email, forwarded by an Amazon worker to the *International Amazon Workers Voice* and dated February 9, declared: “During the Covid-19 pandemic we had temporarily paused stand up meetings. We are excited to announce that with new safety protocol and guidelines, stand-up meetings will be returning on 2/9/2021.”

“Stand-up,” a routine pre-shift staff meeting where managers offer generic pep talks, lead crews of workers in warm-up exercises and brief them on their daily “goals,” was eliminated last spring as COVID-19 swept across the planet. The generic email insists that such gatherings “will be modified, with limited size..., designated Stand-up locations, Stand-up schedules based on Shift code, and department.” Featured on the standard daily agenda are helpful items, such as “Safety Tip,” “Standard Work Tip” and the essential “Big Thank You.”

These meetings are “like a cult,” said one worker who spoke to the IAWV. “They stand us all around, and we’re forced to clap and shout these weird little slogans.” Another worker called them “‘positive reinforcement’ rah-rah sessions.” The worker added that bringing everyone together in person was an “unnecessary risk” the company was taking. “It only takes one person [with COVID-19].”

The new routine will pack workers together in various warehouse locations in groups supposedly no larger than 25 (“24 associates plus 1 leader”). Tellingly, the designated formation for workers at the

meetings (a graphical example is included in the email) resembles a boot camp.

While the diagrams suggest workers will be kept at least six feet apart from one another, a worker said that such protocols were a fiction at Amazon. “I see people, even managers, side by side huddled up with each other.” The Social Distancing teams that Amazon put in place at the start of the pandemic “break the rules that they’re supposed to enforce.”

Throughout the course of the pandemic, Amazon has placed its workers in harm’s way as the corporate giant raked in untold sums of revenue. The company finally admitted last October that at least 20,000 workers had been diagnosed with COVID-19 since March 2020. Amazon admitted this after months of refusing to release details about the number of infections at its warehouses throughout the United States.

Undoubtedly, the actual number of COVID-19 infections at Amazon is much higher. Due to the deplorable state of COVID-19 tracking and tracing efforts, many of the infected go undetected, especially when workers are asymptomatic. “Last summer, my co-worker caught COVID-19, and I didn’t get a notification until two weeks later,” one worker said. Another worker stated bluntly, “We are working in a pandemic-infested location, and it has been that way since day one.”

In addition to this, Amazon has provided only very meager “protections” for its workforce, such as self-administered testing kits, handed out without directions for use and heat sensors to check for temperatures.

The Food and Drug Administration recently put out a bulletin declaring that mishandling and improper use of thermal cameras, such as those used by temperature screeners at Amazon sites, “may lead to inaccurate temperature readings and pose a potential danger to

public health.”

While temperature checks are inadequate for detecting COVID-19, even the ability to detect a fever is undermined by what the *Washington Post* calls a “compensating algorithm” in some of the most popular sensors that “severely undermines the devices’ medical usefulness.” The publication explains: “A feverish person with a core temperature of 100.4 degrees, their research found, could be assessed by the test devices as having a temperature of 98 degrees, well within the healthy range.”

Reuters, in reporting the first use of the Amazon heat sensors, said last year it proves “how America’s second-biggest corporate employer is exploring methods to contain the virus’ spread without shuttering warehouses essential to its operation.” In other words, the company was “exploring methods” of how to present the illusion of safety without actually providing it.

Such flimsy measures, provided by the multibillion-dollar conglomerate and presided over by Jeff Bezos, until recently the world’s richest man, go a long way toward explaining how the COVID-19 pandemic has managed to infect over 100 million people across the globe in the course of the past year despite continuous warnings and advice from medical experts and scientists.

It is telling that Amazon’s announcement of the return of more in-person stand-up meetings has coincided with a general effort by the US political establishment to drop even minor social distancing measures and browbeat workers back to workplaces throughout the country as the pandemic threatens to surge again.

In practice, Amazon has spent billions operating a high-tech dystopia in which workers are confronted at every moment with multiple forms of intrusive and invasive surveillance. Rather than provide for safety and health, the lion’s share of Amazon’s “precautions” go toward the suppression of its own workforce.

The formation of the Baltimore-based BWI2 Fulfillment Center Rank -and-File Safety Committee represents the most class-conscious opposition against the corporate giant and its investors while also upholding as a top priority the defense of workers’ health and safety. It is also for this reason that the American capitalist class, led by the intervention of

United States President Joseph Biden last week, has taken to promoting a corporatist unionization drive at the Alabama Amazon facility.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to surge, it is essential that Amazon and other logistics workers fight to form and join their own independent rank-and-file organizations with no ties to the capitalist two-party political system, answerable only to themselves and other workers.

Such rank-and-file safety committees must demand complete transparency from Amazon, with real-time reporting on COVID-19 infections at their facilities and a serious contact tracing program. Facilities found to be overrun with the virus must close down for industrial-grade cleaning overseen by medical and science experts. Workers affected must be cared for and not have their income disrupted in the process.

If you agree with this program, sign up for the *International Amazon Workers Voice* and contact us for help in building rank-and-file safety committees in your own area.



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